

ODSS Origins

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Summary: Tales and stories of the soldiers of the ODSS and the elite who would one day stand by their side in their moment of need. Rated T for safety

1. 001 Crash

****001 Crash****

****Character: Emily****

* * *

><p>Emily didn't remember what hit them, she just knew that suddenly everything was wrong. She was flying through the air the ground coming up fast. She felt pain as her shoulder hit the ground. She felt things in her break and skin be rubbed away as she skidded over the ground. She came to a stop when she hit something, though she was too disoriented to know what. There was a blurry image, what might have been her brother, and then everything went black.<p>

Emily woke up to an empty hospital room. The only things in the room were a small dresser, an empty chair, a side table that had a small clock on it, and the machines she was hooked up to. Her first instinct was to panic. She had no idea what had happened or where exactly she was. The only thing she knew was she was in a hospital.

She stopped, her father's words of caution echoing in her mind. They had always tried to prepare her and her brother for insurrectionist attacks on their home on Reach. It wasn't often, but there were rebels everywhere. They had always told her that when her mind wanted her to panic she needed to remain calm. Emily took a deep breath and forced herself to calm down.

She took in her situation, looking around the room. She couldn't move her left arm due to a large cast that kept the arm in place. She was aware that her right ankle was bandaged so she would be able to stand

up. She was more annoyed to find that her hair had been shaved down. She'd sent so long growing it out and now it was all gone. She felt around with her right hand until she found a controller. She looked it over, identifying the controls for the bed and the button to call the nurse. She hit the call button and sat back to wait.

A man showed up a little while later, smiling at Emily when she looked over at him. "Well it's good to see that you're finally awake. How are you feeling?"

Emily didn't know what to say to that. She was in pain, sort of. Most of what hurt seemed to be partially numbed, so she ignored the question. "What happened?" Her voice was horse and she got the feeling she'd been out for a while.

The man's smile fell a bit and he moved to kneel beside Emily's bed. "I think that's best left to your grandmother to tell you. I'll call her so she can come and talk to you." The nurse stood up and moved out of the room.

Emily sat in silence for a long time. She fell in and out of sleep, only really waking again when the door was opened. It was a nurse come to take some blood samples. It wasn't until several hours later that Emily's grandmother finally showed up. Emily had been in the care of her grandmother for as long as she could remember. Her mother had died a year ago and her father two years ago, both from rebel activities. She'd always lived with her grandmother though as her parents had both often been away on duty.

Her grandmother right away tried to hug her, though it was too painful for Emily so she stopped. "Oh, I'm so glad you made it. The doctors said that you were in bad shape and they were afraid you wouldn't pull through."

"Grandma, where's Jason? What happened?" No one had told her anything and she wanted to know if her brother had made it through as well.

Her grandmother's expression became grim and Emily felt a dark weight settle in her stomach. "Honey, there was an accident. You and your brother were riding into town on his motor bike. A drunk driver hit you. He tried to run. You barely survived, but Jason died in the crash."

Emily's mouth fell open, unable to believe what she was hearing. Her brother was dead, just like that. Some drunk driver had taken him from her in a second. Emily took deep breaths, unable to fight it back as they turned into sobs and the tears slipped down her cheeks. "Didâ€|did they at..at least get the guy."

Emily's grandmother nodded. "When the man tried to return to his car another kid showed up and knocked him out. He's awaiting his trial right now." Her grandmother sat in the chair beside the bed, her pity obvious in her eyes. "They have video footage of it so they say they won't need you to testify. The doctors say though that you'll be able to head home in a few weeks."

At this point Emily didn't care. She hoped that man rotted in prison for what he'd done. Her family was gone, her grandmother the only family she had left. She remembered late nights with her brother,

blowing out birthday candles in a cake he had clumsily written 'happy birthday Emily' on. She remembered him standing up for her when others picked on her for being smaller than them. All of that was gone, now only memories that would eventually blur and fade over time. Emily just closed her eyes and cried for her fallen brother until she was too tired and slipped into sleep.

2. 002 Dim

002 Dim

Character: Tobias

Tobias hit the ground of the alley, cursing at the pain from the impact. He looked up at the older boy standing over him. "Are you really so dim that you think you can beat me?" The older boy pulled his fist back to take another swing at Tobias.

The fourteen-year-old rolled out of the way and the older boy missed. He sprang to his feet, turning to face his enemy. "You shouldn't count me out." Tobias moved forward throwing a punch.

The older boy caught Tobias' fist and stopped it. "Oh, shouldn't I? You're small and weak." The larger boy's fist slammed into Tobias' stomach. He doubled over and groaned as he fell to his knees, struggling to suck in air and fill his lungs. The older boy's fist came down and Tobias felt it hit the side of his face. He fell to the ground, groaning. Tobias tried to get up, force himself to his feet, but he was disoriented from the hit and he was only then catching his breath.

The older boy laughed at him, kicking him once in the stomach before he left. Tobias just lay on the ground for a while, getting his senses back. His head finally cleared and his breathing evened out. He forced himself to his feet, though he was a bit unsteady, and started to walk. He knew his mom would be mad to find that once again he'd been in a fight, but by now he figured she'd be used to it.

Tobias didn't see any problem with it, he was willing to get beat up every once in a while as long as he believed in why he was getting in a fight. Today it had been over the older boy defacing a UNSC poster. Tobias did have a sense of respect for soldiers after all, and he couldn't just let some kid go around defacing them without a challenge. Even if his mother would give him hell for the bruise that would probably be on his face the next day.

Tobias meandered down the sidewalk, not in any hurry to get home. His mom would see the dirt on his pants and she'd know right away, and he wasn't in any hurry to get yelled at. His hand rubbed at the side of his face that had been hit, trying to ease the pain. His mother would put ice on it when he got home, but he'd have to sit there with it held to his face while she complained about his fighting.

At least his father understood. He only scolded Tobias for getting in fights over things that he didn't think were worth it. He knew his father wouldn't get mad at him this time when he found out why he'd fought. His cousin was a soldier for the UNSC, and proud of it. He would at least understand why Tobias had gotten in a fight. He might

still scold him a bit for having lost, but he wouldn't be as mad as his mom.

Tobias reached the street that his house was on, slowing his pace a bit. Anything to avoid getting home faster and having to sit through angry parents. He stopped in front of the house next door, not yet wanting to reach his own home.

"Got beat up again?" Tobias turned to look at the girl leaning on the porch of the house he stood in front of. He frowned, looking away from her and toward the ground. The girl laughed and moved down from her porch, walking over to Tobias. "Do you ever win fights?"

"I do sometimes." Tobias sulked a bit. He has only won about three fights in his life, which was probably less than a percent of his total fights. "What do you want Natalie?"

"I wanted to offer to help you clean off some of that dirt from your pants so your mom might not notice, but if you're going to have such a grumpy attitude then I won't offer." Natalie crossed her arms and frowned at Tobias.

Tobias right way perked up. "I'm sorry, I'm just unhappy I lost. Please help me." He tried to look as pitiful as he could. He hoped it would make her feel sorry for him and help him out.

Natalie sighed and uncrossed her arms. "All right, come inside." Natalie led him inside of her house. She brought him into her bathroom and had him sit down on the toilet. She then grabbed a towel and wetted it before she started to scrub at the stains on his pants. "What did you get knocked into this time?"

"I fell in an alley." Tobias just watched her scrub at his pants. "The guy was much bigger than me and he got in some good shots."

"Tobias, you're going to get yourself seriously hurt one of these days. I'm afraid that one of these days you're going to pick a fight with someone that won't stop and they're going to hurt you or kill you." There was genuine concern in Natalie's voice. "I just wish you'd be careful."

Tobias smiled a bit. "You're worried about me?" He was a bit excited at the prospect. He'd known Natalie since they were little kids, having always lived next to each other, and as he grew up Tobias had come to find he was attracted to his friend. Though she'd never shown any signs of returning his feelings.

"Of course I'm worried about you. You and I have been friends for almost all our lives. You're my best friend, of course I'm worried about you." Natalie stood up and Tobias frowned. "Now pants off."

Tobias blushed as her hands moved to his waist to pull his pants down. "What are you doing? I'm not taking my pants off around you."

"Oh, don't be a baby. It wouldn't be the first time I've seen your underwear. Unless you didn't wear any today." Natalie raised an eye brow. "Did someone go commando?"

"Natalie, the last time you saw my underwear was when you pantsed me and we were ten." Tobias grabbed his pants to keep them on. "Stop it."

Natalie let his pants go and rolled her eyes. "Fine, then I'll leave the bathroom and you can take them off." She grabbed a towel and tossed it at him before she left the bathroom.

Tobias removed his pants and put the towel around his waist and hung his pants on the towel rung before he moved out of the bathroom. He found Natalie sitting in the living room, watching some crime show. Tobias took a seat on the couch and sat in silence with her.

It was several hours later that his pants finished drying, or they remembered that his pants were drying. He embarrassedly got dressed. Natalie tried to convince him to stay but he knew he had to get home. He bit her goodnight and headed home. Cleaning his pants had worked. His mother had no idea he'd been in a fight, until his father noticed the slight swelling of his face.

3. 003 Futile

****003 Futile****

****Character: James****

James walked toward the building, not really happy. This wasn't really what he saw himself doing with his life, but it was the family business. His father use to say that fighting fate and his legacy was as futile as fighting gravity. That was why he was here, because he couldn't fight the legacy that his father was leaving him.

James moved to the side as a truck carrying metal supplies for a new project rolled past. He didn't even know what anything on the truck was. He knew that when you put them all together they made a building, but that was about it. He had never studied buildings, never been interested in them. He'd found science, particularly physics, much more interesting, but his father had always told him he couldn't make a living with physics.

James moved up to the main building and opened the door. He headed back through the offices to the one he knew was his fathers. The door was shut so he knocked, waiting for a reply. It was about a minute later when his father finally said he could come in. James opened the door and stepped to the side as another man moved out of the office. He then moved inside and shut the door behind him.

"Well, you excited for your first day?" His father asked. James only shrugged. He wasn't really sure how to reply to that. "Well, we'll get you the basic safety gear and then we'll head out to our first sight. I'm going to teach you the trade step by step." His father grinned and moved around the desk and out of the office.

James followed his father to the work supplies where he got a hard hat, gloves, safety glasses, and a high visibility vest. James just held them as they made their way to one of the company trucks and got in. He set them on his lap and just stared out the window as they moved through the town. James watched as towers and houses rushed

past them. Where they stopped was not what he expected.

The building they had arrived at there were already people working at and it wasn't being freshly built. The building was made of an old stone substance that James didn't recognize right off the bat. He didn't even know there were any buildings still made of stone in the city. There were bits chipped away and it looked like no one had used it in a long time.

"This, James, is a demolition site. This is the first stage of building a new building. If there's already a building on the land you're going to be building on, then you have to remove it before you can build anything." James' father put on his safety gear so James did the same. He felt a bit silly in the outfit, but everyone else was wearing them so he didn't feel like he stood out.

They walked toward the building, James' father greeting some of the people as they moved inside. James watched the people working. They were checking walls and looking over plans as they attached something to particular places. He looked over the structure and then identified the devices. They must be charges that would go off and take out the walls supporting the building.

"James, I'd like you to meet Phil. He's the man that runs my demolition crew." James' father was standing beside a man who was in his late 30s with light brown hair. "He's been with the company for almost a decade."

"Well I love my work with the company and I enjoy putting my skills to use. So James, I hear you're planning on taking up the torch after your father. He going to have you start working after school?" Phil asked.

James nodded. It wasn't something he was particularly happy about. His father wanted him to start working for the company as soon as he could. That meant that now his weeknights and weekends were going to be spent working. He wasn't even getting paid all that much for it. He wouldn't have minded if it didn't mean he'd now have to be paying for a lot of his things like food and possibly rent if his father felt like it.

"Well, you seem like a quiet young man." Phil held out a sheet and James looked at it. "This is the plans of where we need to put all of the explosives in order to have this building implode. Imploding it is safer for the buildings around it than a normal demolition where any debris falling around it wouldn't matter much. You use implosions a lot in a city when removing old buildings."

James looked it over and then looked around. He pointed at a particular wall. "You need one on that wall or that second wouldn't fall properly. It might cause it instead to tip and force debris out of your zone." James pointed out the wall on the map. "It's not labeled here."

Phil frowned and then put the map away, retrieving a second one. He cursed to himself. "That's the last time I let Teddy do the mock ups for the rest of the team. It's on my original but he missed it on the second version." Phil put away the drawing and turned to James. "It's not a problem. It will actually give me a chance to show you how we put one of these in place. It's a useful skill."

James spent a while learning from Phil how he set the charge in place, secured it to the wall, and ran the lines back to join with the rest of the explosives. It was a while later that they all stood outside of the blast zone and Phil was showing him the detonator. "It's rather simply really, just a button that you press and the whole thing goes down." He handed it over to James. "As this is your first one and you did help us from having a mishap, why don't you do the honors?"

James took the detonator and hit the green button. He could see the flashes inside as the explosives went off. They started in the upper level and moved down as the building collapsed in on itself. James looked away as a cloud of dust spread forth from the building. It took a bit for it to settle down but when it did there was nothing but a pile of stone left in the place of the building.

James' father put a hand on his shoulder. "That is the first stage of construction, James. Removing the old to put in the new. Tomorrow I'll bring you back down here and you can see how they remove the debris."

James followed his father back to the truck and sat down in the passenger's seat. He removed his gear and looked toward the rubble. "I think I found a part of construction I like," he muttered.

4. 004 Erratic

****004 Erratic****

****Character: Tobias****

Tobias just sat on the couch, listening to his father scold him. He was used to this by now. His parents just didn't understand how difficult things were for him. It wasn't like it was as easy as they kept making it seem.

"You need to pick a path and follow it. I don't know what's happened to you recently Tobias. You get into nothing but fights, your school work is falling behind. You've suddenly become this erratic teenager with no path or direction to head. What is wrong with you?" His father had been going on like this for a while now. He was upset over a class that Tobias was failing. It wasn't his fault that he didn't like math very much. It was stupid anyway. He knew the stuff, he just didn't see a point to it all. "You have nothing to say for yourself?"

Tobias shrugged, not really having anything to say. He knew that a month ago he hadn't been like this, he's worked at school, he'd had more of a plan, but all of that was gone now. Without Natalie he didn't know what he would do with his life. All his plans had revolved around her. Now she was gone and he had nothing.

Tobias' father must have noticed the look on his face and he moved to the couch, sitting beside his son. "You really miss her?" Tobias nodded. "I know it's not easy to lose someone that you care so much about, but you can't let it ruin your life. Death is a part of being human, and it hurts, but we have to carry on. I don't think Natalie would like to see you throwing away your life. I know you and she

have been friends basically all your lives and it is hard for her to be gone."

Tobias shook his head. "You don't understand." No one could understand. He was only fifteen so no one ever understood how he felt. He hesitated to tell his father anything but he saw no reason to keep it from him now. "Natalie wasn't just my friend. She and I were dating. We'd been dating for three months before what happened. I loved her."

His father hesitated, holding back the words Tobias knew he wanted to say. They all thought he was too young to know if he loved someone or not, but he'd known he loved Natalie. He didn't care about age. "I had no idea you two were together. I'm sorry son. I can't understand what that's like, but I can understand that I love your mother and that without her I wouldn't know what to do."

"Natalie's father didn't approve of me so we kept it from everyone. We had plans you know? We knew what we were going to do." Tobias shook his head, letting his head droop. "Now none of that matters."

His father paused as he stared at his son. "Maybe you should get a job." Tobias looked at him confused. "Maybe having a job, something to do, work, will help you get past the grief, or at least for a while put it to the side and escape from it. I don't like seeing you this way, Tobias. You're my son and I want you to be happy. I know you're strong and will find a path on your own. I know you'll make it through this pain, but work might help."

Tobias just watched his father stand up and move out of the room. Tobias thought about what his father said. Maybe a job would be a good idea.

5. 005 Loved

****005 Loved****

****Character: Luke****

Luke sat on the blanket beside his father, staring up at the sky. They'd come to the field like many other families had to watch the air show. There was supposed to be a show of skilled ship fliers that day. His father had told him that there were going to be pelicans and people crafts, even some of the really old ships that couldn't fly in space like a longsword.

Luke was only seven, but he loved things that flew. He clutched the toy longsword tighter in his hand as he waited for the next of the shuttles to start up. His father had told him that the next group was supposed to be a trick flyer in a pelican. He'd never seen that before and he couldn't wait. Luke wondered what it was like to be one of the pilots, the entire sky as your domain and your own craft that did exactly as you ordered it to.

Luke perked up as he could hear the roar of engines and he looked out to the field where he knew the pelican would show up. It appeared to the side of the field and Luke's eyes went wide. The pelican had been painted a dark black and on top of that the wings and nose of it had

been painted with what looked to be flames. He watched as it sped forward, moving toward a series of towers in the middle of the field that had been put up.

The pelican maneuvered between the poles, pulling loops and spins as it did. It rose up high into the sky and Luke watched with excitement as the engines suddenly kicked off. He watched the pelican plummet toward the ground and just at the last moment the engines fired back to life and it nosed up, barely managing not to hit the ground as it took off.

Luke sat with his mouth wide open, not believing what he'd just seen. He heard his father clapping but Luke could only watch the pelican as it moved off. "Are you excited for the next group?" Luke's father asked. He looked up at his father, confused. "Up next are the black hawks."

A grin spread over Luke's face and he stood up and jumped about a bit. "Now look what you've done. Now he's all worked up." His mother shook her head at her son's sudden burst of energy.

"Oh, he's a kid, let him be excited." His father smiled as Luke looked toward the sky looking for the famous pilots.

The Black Hawks were known throughout all of Earth's colonies, and they were Luke's favorite. They were a group of five longsword pilots and one pelican pilot from the UNSC that were known for their flight skills. Luke loved to watch them and he was nearly bouncing out of his skin as he waited for them to appear.

The pelican was the first thing to appear and it was amazing. It was painted completely black but as the pelican made a pass for the crowd it tilted to the side so that people could see the top where silver lines outlined feathers on the wings and made the rear look like a hawk tail. It righted itself and Luke looked up just in time to see the five longswords streak over the field.

He watched for several minutes as the longswords made group maneuvers, coming within feet of each other or the pelican before moving out of the way at the very last second. It was an amazing show and after the Hawks anything else would have been lame.

Luke held his father's hand as they walked back toward their car. "Daddy, can I be a Black Hawk when I grow up?"

Luke's father smiled down at him. "You can be whatever you want, son." He squeezed his son's hand lightly and Luke grinned happily as they walked back toward the car.

Luke sat on the crate, watching the pilots as they sat together. He stared at the insignia on their shoulders, the jet black hawk outlined in silver. They weren't at all what he had expected. They didn't look like soldiers, move like celebrities. While most soldiers at this point in the war were either green or scarred there wasn't a mark on them and he knew they weren't new to the force. He frowned, turning away from them.

"What's got you down, buttercup?" Peter sat down beside his partner, elbowing him lightly. "What, not interested in some verbal foreplay?"

"Not right now, Peter." Luke just continued to focus on the Black Hawks, trying to figure out what he ever saw in the false soldiers.

Peter followed his line of sight and frowned. "You know if you keep staring at other guys I'm going to get pissed and beat one of them up."

"Go ahead. They've officially ruined my childhood." Luke sighed and tore his gaze from the pilots. "I don't know why I ever wanted to be one of them. They aren't really soldiers. They don't do any good."

"They're good for show, to get people interested in being pilots, but the real thing is much more interesting." Peter stood up and held his hand out to Luke. "Come on, we'll be late for afternoon drills." Luke batted his hand away as he stood. Peter shrugged, brushing it off. "Besides, who wants to be a Hawk when you can be a Demon?" Luke smiled a bit as he followed his partner toward the gym to meet up with the rest of their team.

6. 006 Soft

006 Soft

Character: Shadow Blade

Enre stood in line watching as his uncle walked past them. There were five other young elites in line with him as they listened to the speech. Enre had great respect for his uncle. He had been a great warrior all his life until his wife had died. He'd been a Filed Master and had only retired because he had said he could no longer pass on his genes and wanted to train the future instead. There were scars from combat on his skin and he stood with a pride born from victory in combat.

"You must be strong, unbreakable in your will. You will be guided by your honor, by the traditions of our people. Our traditions reward the strong and destroy those who are too soft to do what must be done. Life is never easy on our people, and it will not be easy on you. I will not be easy on you. You will get hurt and if you are a true warrior you will be able to push through it." Enre's uncle stopped and turned toward them. He eyed one of the soldiers and then turned away moving over to a set of wooden rods that were lined against the wall. "Take one and find an opponent."

Enre moved over to the wall and took one of the rods. He looked around and spotted who he wanted to be his opponent. "Ahwu, do you want to be my opponent?" He moved over to the single female elite in his training group. It was very rare for a female to be allowed to be a soldier, but after having beaten up most of the other elites in the keep Ahwu had earned the right.

"You mean do I want to be the one to kick your butt." Ahwu gripped her rod and moved a bit away from him. "It would be my pleasure to kick your back side across the courtyard."

Enre knew she was only partially teasing him but that she wouldn't go

easy. Ahwu was one of Enre's closest friends, but she was serious about her combat. They stood at the ready and Enre waited for her to strike first. Ahwu was always aggressive so he knew she would fight back. She charged forward and Enre focused on defense, looking for a chance. The problem was that Ahwu didn't leave openings. Instead she attacked with great strength and knocked his rod to the side. She swung and the wood smacked Enre in the head.

Enre fell to the ground and shook his head, trying to clear his vision which was a bit blurry. He shook his head and flinched a bit as he notice his uncle standing nearby. "Enre, you must never leave an opening. A warrior that only defends can never defeat his enemy. You must strike at your foe, not block." Enre's uncle shook his head and moved over to another pair.

Ahwu moved over and held out her hand, helping Enre stand up. "A warrior that only attacks will die quickly in battle. You did fine, I'm just better than you are." Enre growled a bit. She'd been being nice, but even when she was being nice she insulted him.

Enre moved back to his place and prepared for their match. Ahwu move forward and Enre went on the defense. He was watching her movements carefully and he saw it, an opening. Enre struck out, knocking away her rod away and landing a blow to her neck. She fell to the ground and Enre stood over her, relaxing a bit.

"Much better, Enre. When you are strong your enemy will fall before you." His uncle nodded, showing his approval before he moved over to rebuke the failure of another of the trainee elites.

Enre moved over to Ahwu and held out his hand to help her up. "Shows how much attention he is paying." He pulled her up and she gave him a confused look. "You never leave an opening. I don't need your help, you know that?"

"Odd, because I could have sworn you could. Besides, I'm not the one that needs to appear to be a good warrior to have mating rights." Ahwu shook her head and took a stance again. "Now this time for real. I swear I shall be on the defense, now show me your attack."

Enre charged at her, striking with all of his strength. They continued like this, eventually starting to trade back and forward between offense and defense in the same match, finding ways to force an opponent onto the defensive.

Practice had ended long ago and now darkness was falling on their world. The sun was dipping below the horizon and Enre sat on the hill, legs bent so that he wouldn't be uncomfortable. He watched as the light slowly ebbed away.

"I think, Enre, that with some work you will be a good and proper soldier. You must be for our future." Enre looked to Ahwu, not sure what had brought on the words. She looked to him and there was a sort of sad look on her face. "When you look at me Enre, what do you see?"

Enre tilted his head to the side, deciding what to say. "I see Ahwu, my friend as long as I remember. The warrior who is helping me become strong. Why?"

Ahwu's hands moved up and Enre felt them rest on the sides of his head. There was a determination in her eyes as she spoke to him. "Then you must become strong. You and I see the world the same. We look at the structures and we see pretty buildings but not the work of gods. You are a smart elite, Enre, you see what tradition at times blinds us to." She leaned forward so that her head touched his. "You must pass this on to the next generation. You must become a great warrior so that there is no way they can deny you marriage, continuing your blood, continue a line of smarter warriors who are not blind followers."

Enre moved his hands up to hers, removing them from his head but holding onto them. "I swear to you, Ahwu, that I shall be a great warrior."

7. 007 Hold

007 Hold

Character: Peter

Peter leaned back in his seat, watching as the cards were dealt. He counted, only to tell when the dealer had finished. There wasn't really a point to counting cards in poker. When the dealer finished Peter sat up, gathering up his cards. He made sure his face stayed blank as he looked them over deciding what move to make.

They went through a first round of betting and two of the other players folded. Peter swapped out one of his cards and when it came to him he raised. Another of the players folded while they went through another wave of matching and the player a few seats to Peter's right raised. Peter raised on top of that.

They had been at this for some time and another player had to drop out, not having enough credits to cover the raise. It left just Peter and one other player, sitting and looking at each other. Peter cracked a slight smirk as the other player looked uncertain. "Why not just go all in and hand your credits over to me, Geoff? You could just give it to me now and save us all some time. Besides, we're out of beer so one last hand should do us for the night."

The other man glared at him. "That crap isn't going to cut it tonight. I'm not drunk enough to be taken in by your trash talk, Peter." The man pushed all of his chips forward. "I'm all in."

Peter shrugged and pushed enough credits forward. "I call." He then tossed down his cards and smiled. "Three kings. Can you beat that?"

Geoff groaned and smacked his hands to the side of his head. "Damn, my girlfriend is going to be so pissed that I lost this much." He threw down his cards and Peter saw that he only had a pair of jacks.

Peter shook his head and gathered up his credits. "See, that's why I don't have a girlfriend. I don't want someone nagging me for when I lose."

"Yeah, sure, that's the reason you don't have a girlfriend." Peter

shot a frown at Marcus. He was one of the few people who knew of Peter's personal preference which he still hadn't admitted to any of his other friends. Marcus saw the look and quickly changed the subject. "You wouldn't have to worry, anyway. When was the last time you left with less credits than you arrived with?"

Peter shrugged. "I can't remember the last time. The problem is you boys don't know the proper time to hold them and when you should fold them. You also don't know when to bluff and when to pretend you are bluffing and how to make them look the same."

"How'd you get so good at all of that? I mean a sixteen-year-old shouldn't be that good at gambling," Geoff complained.

"I've been gambling most of my life. Gotten into trouble for it a few times. Nearly gone to jail several times but charges were dropped. Why do you think I ended up in military school?" Peter pocketed the credits and stood up. "Well, we should get back to the barracks. We'll need to get some sleep before morning drills." The others groaned but got up, gathering their things before heading out the door.

They all froze outside the door and Peter cursed, shoulders slumping when he caught sight of the Sergeant. "Oh, you all better get some sleep because tomorrow I'm going to work you like a rented mule." The moved past the smirking Sergeant and back to the barracks.

8. 008 Shackles

****008 Shackles****

****Character: Tym****

Tym sat on the top of a large rock that was sitting in the pasture of his family's farm. He often sat here while he watched the animals graze. They had some cows that they would milk and sell at a local market, but they also had some sheep for wool and a couple goats, though Tym still wasn't sure why they had those. They also had a few Hormorts, a native animal that were often either kept for their meat or their milk. Tym's family kept them for their milk until they got to old and were slaughtered.

Tym looked over as a young boy ran toward the rock. "I finished feeding the chickens." He climbed up the rock though the boy had more trouble as he was smaller. "Does that mean that I'm finished for the day?"

Tym shook his head. "You're never done, but you do get a break. You can sit with me and keep an eye on Lulu." Tym looked out toward the brown cow who was grazing not far away. She was due to have a calf in less than a week so they were keeping an eye on her to be sure they could take care of her when the time came.

"Will dad let me help with her giving birth this time?" The little boy stared at the cow, as though any moment she'd suddenly go into labor.

"Well, you're ten and I was about ten when dad first let me help him with a cow giving birth. Though I'll warn you, it's not really

pretty." Tym frowned, remembering his first time. People always said birth was magical, the most beautiful thing there was. He strongly disagreed.

The boy sat beside Tym for a while until he finally gathered the courage to speak. "Tym, is dad going to leave the farm to you and not me?"

"I sure hope not." Tym shook his head and looked at his brother. The boy didn't seem to understand what he meant. "It's hard for you to understand cause you're so young, Mal. Sure, when I was your age I liked being on a farm, but as I've gotten older, it just doesn't feel like a life calling. I like the animals, and hard work is rewarding, but I just don't feel like this is the reason I was born." Tym looked out toward the animals. "It doesn't suit me. So I hope dad gives you the farm. I'll find my own way."

"What do you think you'll do with your life?" Mal asked, pulling his legs up to his chest as he looked at his brother. He looked at him like the idea of not living on the farm was crazy. Then again, he was too young to know how much of a world there was out there.

"I don't know yet. Maybe I'll find something that has to do with fire. I enjoy when I get to burn the trash. I'm sure there's a job out there somewhere that needs someone that likes starting fires." Tym shrugged. To him exactly what he would do wasn't really an issue. All he knew was that being a farmer was not what he was meant to be. Tym stood up and looked toward the sun. "Come on, we need to try to round up the cattle. Dad will want us to milk them in half an hour and it will be best if we can get them all comfortable in the barn before we start."

Mal jumped up and slid down the rock. Tym sort of envied how excited he was. He was that at one time in his life, but he didn't feel that way anymore. He sighed and moved down the rock and toward the animals to herd them inside.

9. 009 Broken

****009 Broken****

****Character: Patrick****

Patrick had always been good with technology. He'd had an understanding of them, studying them since he was just a kid. Eventually he turned that into a way to make money. He would have people bring their broken electronics to him and he would fix them for a bit less than a normal store. It made him a good bit of money. He was only ten but he knew that right now is father's restaurant wasn't doing well so he was trying to do his best to not be a burden on his family in hard times.

Patrick stared down at the device, reading over the code on it. To most people it was just a collection of letters, numbers, and symbols that were random. To Patrick it was as easy as reading a children's book. He could also learn so much about his customers from it. Take the lines he was looking at for example. He could tell this person played a lot of solitaire, probably pretending to be doing school work or something. From here he could see what kinds of book marks

the guy had on his web browser. He frowned, a bit disturbed by the large number of furry porn sights.

Patrick stopped as he finally found the problem. "Here's what's wrong. You have a corrupted line in an update. You must have shut off your computer or something before it could finish loading. That meant that a portion of the code didn't get downloaded so it keeps trying to use that line of data, but you don't have it."

"I don't care about the details, kid. I just want to know if you can fix it." The teenager was impatient and Patrick didn't appreciate his tone. "I don't have the time for your nerd talk."

"Geek," Patrick corrected. He reached into his own bag and pulled out his own tablet, looking through his list of programs. "Do you have the money?"

"Yeah, I've got the money, as long as you've got the fix." The teenager pulled out some money and counted it out, making sure he had enough.

"I've got the fix. Just wanted to be sure you could pay." Patrick linked the two tablets up and he set about deleting the update from the guy's tablet and then uploading the full version. As the update was installing he also slipped in his own little bug. It was how Patrick managed to keep such a large stock of programs, enough that their total size was larger than his tablet could handle. Whenever he worked on something he put this little code in it. It allowed him to wirelessly use the programs on other people's devices to fix and install programs on whoever's device he was working on. From the registry it seemed this update was coming from the tablet of Alecia, one of his classmates.

Patrick made sure to get his money before giving the tablet back. He knew better than to give it back without getting paid first. It had only take one guy running off before paying for him to learn the lesson. He waited until the customer was gone before he pocketed the cash with the rest of his money. Most of it was at home, but he kept enough on him to be able to make change. Patrick then pulled out his tablet and checked that his little bug was working on the new device. Satisfied that it was he put his tablet away and headed home.

Patrick stopped as a female teenager moved over toward him. "Hey, are you that kid that fixes things for cheap? My phone is messed up and I can't afford to have an official store fix it."

Patrick nodded. "Yeah, that's me." He held his hand out for the device and smiled a bit. "I'll even give you a discount since you're a first time customer."

"Oh, thank you so much." The girl beamed at him happily as Patrick started to look over the device and figure out what was wrong with it.

10. 010 Precious

010 Precious

****Characters: Luke/Peter****

Peter sat on the ground, trying to clear the ache in his skull. His head still hurt from the right hook that Edward had landed. It was kind of ironic really. He'd been hit because Edward had thought that he was trying to edge in on Emily. It was funny when Peter thought about it as he had no interest at all in the woman. He'd only been talking to her because he'd wanted someone to complain to about Luke.

Luke was a hard man to work with. Really Peter couldn't tell why they didn't get along. They should have. They both didn't exactly like doing what they were told, they both had similar senses of humor, and they both were more than happy to make the smallest thing an argument. The thing was Peter never hated Luke after these fights. With the things they said and the physical fighting it was logical that he would, but he just didn't.

In fact Peter found himself feeling closer and closer. He and Luke weren't angry teenagers looking for a fight with another guy, they were two dogs just fighting for dominance. Neither of them was particularly stronger than the other so they were always trying to see who was better on that day. It didn't tear them apart but rather brought the two of them closer together. Slowly they were growing closer and closer and at some point the bond that Peter shared with Luke had become precious to him. Something he wanted to do anything to protect.

The problem was that they weren't just becoming friends. Peter couldn't help it but he'd started to have feelings for his partner. He kept them to himself, not sure how Luke felt, or if he was even into that, or even how their squad leader would take it. He wasn't willing to risk his friendship or his place on the squad just because of his attraction.

Peter leaned back against the concrete side of the building and stared up at the clouds above. He took a deep breath and sighed as a shadow settled over him. "What do you want?"

"Well you didn't come back to the barracks and since you're my partner I went looking for you. You know we're supposed to watch our partner's back." Luke kicked Peter's leg a bit. "What happened to you anyway? You're a mess."

"Edward socked me." Peter's foot struck out but missed Luke's leg as he moved out of the way. "You know she only means you have to watch my back when we're in training or combat. You know, be a spotter for me in the gym and such."

Luke ignored Peter's last comment. "You know you shouldn't pick fights with Edward. Why exactly did he knock you on your ass anyway?" Luke shook his head, apparently disappointed that Peter had made such a mistake as getting in a fight with Edward. Not that it had really been a fight. Peter hadn't wanted to fight, he'd just been hit. "Maybe you can stand a chance against me, but I think if you tick off Edward you might wake up with a knife in your chest." Luke leaned a bit closer toward him. "You didn't hit on him, did you?"

Peter forced himself to stay calm, to not answer too quickly. He really didn't want Luke to know that him hitting on Edward would be a

possibility if the man weren't already attached to someone. "He hit me because he thought that I was hitting on Emily."

Luke laughed and Peter frowned at him. He didn't understand what was so funny about that. Luke shook his head and realized that Peter was glaring at him. "Sorry, but I can't believe he thinks you're dumb enough, or brave enough, to hit on Emily."

"See, now that sounds like a challenge. I bet you I can flirt with her." Peter couldn't help himself. He was always looking for another chance to gamble. He was more than willing to admit he was addicted, but that didn't mean it was a problem.

"What would you get if you win? We don't really have credits. What would I get if you didn't manage to do it?" Luke smirked at him, as though knowing that Peter couldn't do it.

It was a stupid bet, and Peter knew it, but he couldn't stop himself. "You can have whatever you want, of course within reason. Like no committing felonies or anything."

Luke stared at him for a moment and then nodded. "Deal." They shook on it and then headed across the base.

They found Emily in the gym, running on a treadmill. Peter gathered up his courage, checked that Edward wasn't around and walked over toward Emily. "Hey there." Emily looked at him, apparently confused by him talking to her. "You look good running." He cursed, not sure really what to say. "I mean, your body is very appealing." He sighed, not sure really what to do.

"Are you trying to hit on me?" Emily stopped on the treadmill and glanced over where Luke was standing nearby. "Oh, you made a bet with him, didn't you?" Peter nodded. "Do you even want to be hitting on me?"

Peter shook his head. "No offense but I'm just not interested. It's just that Luke challenged if I would hit on you, so I automatically made a bet."

"No offense taken. You're obviously playing for the other team." Emily returned to her exercise. "Maybe that's why you and Luke get along."

Peter stared at her for a moment. "What do you mean?"

Emily glanced over at him like he was stupid. "He's hit on like three guys since he got here. He hasn't hit on a single girl. Seriously, you're his partner and you don't know. You're blinder than Tym and Tobias with their friendship."

Peter ignored the comment about how blind he was and leaned against the bar of the treadmill, thinking. Come to think of it he'd never seen Luke even look at a girl. He glanced back at Luke and then back to Emily. "Sometimes you're close to a person and you can completely miss things about them. Like you don't realize that Edward probably was a hitman before he became a soldier."

"No, I'm well aware of the many violent things Edward could have done before he became a soldier. I am aware because unlike you I'm not an

idiot," Emily snapped.

Peter decided that he didn't need to be hit again that day so he just walked away from it. He moved over to Luke and stood before him. "I flirted with her."

"She didn't seem very attracted to you. Are you sure you didn't just chat with her?" Luke didn't seem to buy it that Peter had tried to flirt.

"Hey, you never said I have to successfully flirt." Peter took a step closer to his partner. "Time to pay up."

Luke sighed and gave in. "All right, you won. What do you want?" He set his hands on his hips and waited for whatever demand Peter would decide on.

Peter paused for a moment deciding on what he wanted. He finally made a choice and he moved forward quickly. He brought his lips together, pressing himself against his partner. He had expected that Luke would push him away but he didn't. They stood in the gym, trying to pull each other closer until they broke apart, needing air.

Luke smirked at Peter. "You are so stupid." Peter frowned at him, not sure why he was being insulted. "Can't believe you thought you needed to win a bet to do that." He pulled the other man to him again and they kissed until a boot hit his head. They turned around to see an annoyed Emily. "I think that's her way of saying get a room."

Peter sighed and shook his head. "There's such a double standard. She can make out with Edward in the gym and no one gets mad. No one tells them to get a room."

"That's because a lot of the people on the squad like to watch or are too scared that Emily will scare them physically for disturbing her." Luke shrugged and started to move out. "Come on, it's not worth any bruises over. I think we can find a place to be alone." Peter moved after him.

11. 011 Odds and Ends

****011 Odds and Ends****

****Character: Matthew****

Matthew gathered up different pieces, gathering them all on his desk. He was still new to the job so he was trying to get the hang of knowing what was what. Matthew had always put all his effort into whatever he did. This was why he was working hard to learn this new skill. Not that's this was exactly new to him. Matthew had picked the lock to his house a couple time when the control had malfunctioned, but he'd never used tools like this.

Before him lay a tool to pry open the control panel. Matthew had only ever used a hammer and a piece of metal to get it open. With this tool he'd be able to get a panel open without damaging the case. He examined it, trying to figure out how it worked. He was fairly sure he understood it, though he should probably watch a professional use it before he took a crack at it.

Matthew turned his attention to another item. It seemed like such a simple item, but it was so important. It was what hooked up the control pad to the electronics that controlled the locks on any door. Matthew wasn't all that great with electronics, but he could basically understand the circuit. Just following the lines he could see where connections were that sent signals to the controls of the door. He'd replaced one of these before, though the one he'd put in was second hand. This piece was fresh and new.

Matthew moved on to studying the actual control case. It was a model he'd never seen before, or at least not in his neighborhood. His boss had told him it was part of their deluxe lock system. That would explain why he'd never seen it. His family did fine for themselves but they could never afford anything like this system. He powered up the panel and looked over the interface. It was much more detailed than his home system and it flowed better as he moved his hand over the screen. It was diffidently the best that money could buy.

Matthew pulled out a datapad and hooked up to the control pad. Matthew ran the diagnostic software on the datapad and a list of thing came up. He read through them, grabbing a second datapad and opened up a directory of all the different problems behind each code. From the looks of it he was getting the errors he would expect. All the pins were reading as not completed circuits and it was indicating that the software hadn't been installed yet.

Matthew fully turned his attention to the list of errors and started to try to memories them, see any pattern that would make them easier to identify. They were all numbered, which made looking them up easier, but there didn't seem to really be any shorthand used. At least none that Matthew could understand.

"Matthew, I didn't know you were still here." Matthew looked over his shoulder to where his boss stood a bit behind him. "You know the store is closing up. You should really head home."

"Sorry, sir. I was just trying to familiarize myself with all the parts of the job. I can clear out if you want me to. I just need to put these parts away." Matthew clicked off the datapads and went to put away the prying tool.

"That's a good idea, getting to know the merchandise. It doesn't seem like it but a big part of the job is fitting the customer with the proper lock for them. People come here because I don't try to fit them with the most expensive lock I can. I look at what they have to protect, how much they had to spend, and what neighborhood they live in. Let's take you for example." Matthew stopped, turning his full attention to his boss. This was information from an experienced man and he didn't want to miss any of it. "Where do you live?"

"Well I live on Locklear road, just down the way from the park." Matthew walked back over toward his desk and sat down.

"Well that's a fairly nice neighborhood, not a lot of crime. If you were running on your salary here I would say one of our medium range locks, in the lower price range. Because of the lack of crime a heavy lock wouldn't be necessary and due to your position you wouldn't have a lot of walking around money. Any valuables in your home?" Matthew

shook his head. "Then my suggestion would still stand. If you were say a parent I might say a bit higher of protection as your child's safety would be important. It's why when a family is very poor, living in one of the more dangerous parts of the city if they come in and have a child they want to protect I'll usually authorize a discount on the lock. This company is successful because we care about the people."

"That seems like a logical thing to do. A customer that can't afford the more expensive model would be insulted by you trying to push the wrong thing on them." Matthew was fairly sure that he understood the concept.

"Exactly. We want happy customers that we have been helpful for." His boss smiled and moved to the door where he grabbed his hat. "Well, goodnight , Matthew."

"Goodnight, sir." Matthew watched as his boss left and he turned his attention back to his work.

12. 012 Tea

012 Tea

Character: Emily

Emily set the stuffed black bear into its place at the table. She made sure he wasn't going to fall over and she moved back over to her bed, climbing up on the soft blue sheets, and grabbed the stuffed eagle that was sitting there. She turned to move back to the small table and stopped as she spotted her brother watching her. "What?" She hugged the eagle to her chest, frowning at her brother.

"Are you having a tea party?" From Jason's voice was skeptical, and Emily understood why. She wasn't really well known for doing classical girly things.

Emily moved over to the table and set the eagle down in his seat. "Of course not. We're having a war meeting. The rebellion in the system is getting out of hand and they're trying to decide how best to take care of it." Emily sat down at her seat at the table.

Jason shook his head, moving a bit into her room. "You know if you're doing something girly you don't have to lie to me about it? There's nothing wrong with it."

Emily glared at him. "I'm not having a tea party. Tea parties are stupid and pointless. They don't get anything done and no one as an adult has one." Emily shook her head. She would have thought Jason knew better. "You know what dad says: always try to be productive." She stumbled a bit on the last word. Her father had only just taught it to her and at the age of eight she still didn't exactly know what it meant.

"Yeah but you're just playing. When you're playing you don't need to be productive. You just play for the fun of it." Jason moved over to the table and looked down at the stuffed animals. "So what's going on in your not-a-tea-party?"

Emily tried not to roll her eyes at her brother's stupidity. "I told you we're talking about the rebel problem. This is Admiral Quick Strike." Emily motioned toward the eagle. "He's in charge of the anti-rebellion operations. That is Rear Admiral Sharp Claw." She motioned to the black bear. "He's head of the fleet that Admiral Quick Strike wants to send in to take care of it." She pointed to the black wolf that sat in the final seat. "That's Major Shadow Fang. He's head of a large division of ODSF that Admiral Quick Strike wants to deploy to take care of the problems."

Jason looked over the table and then back to Emily. "Well then where do you fit into all of this?" Jason knelt down and looked closer at the stuffed animals.

"I'm Lord Emily Aldura, head of the UNSC forces. The Admiral is here to request the fleet as it is currently on patrol in another system." Emily sat up taller and reached over, grabbing the eagle. She held it up so that it was in Jason's face and spoke in a deeper voice. "Why else would we be here? Any forces being moved from their decided duties have to be approved by an officer with the authority to do so." She stumbled over a few words, but her meaning was clear enough. Emily put the eagle back down in his seat.

"Well excuse me for needing some information." Jason looked around and there was a sort of worried look on his face. "Are you sure you don't want to call one of your female classmates and see if they want to play?"

"None of them like the same things as me. They like dressing up dolls, flowers, and skipping rope. I don't like any of those things. I like playing rebels-vs-marines, scaring groups of moa, and trying to catch mortos down at the lake." Emily turned her gaze away from him.

"Well those sound like things that the boys in your classes might be into. Maybe we could call up one of them and you can play with them." Jason put on a smile and as Emily looked to him she could tell it was fake.

"They don't want to play with girls. They said I'm icky." Emily reached out and grabbed the eagle, holding it against her chest. "These are my best friends, they understand me."

The worried look returned to Jason's face but he didn't say anything. "Is there anyone that could come over and play with you?"

Emily thought about that for a bit. She shook her head. There was only one person she could think of but she didn't even know his name, where he lived, or how to contact him. He was just some boy she'd met who seemed friendly.

The door to their house opened and Emily stood up. "That's probably grandma. I'll help her with the groceries." She just really wanted to get away from her brother. She knew that he and her grandmother didn't approve of how few people Emily knew or how she played alone all the time but the kids at school just didn't get her. Maybe when she was older the boys would finally be willing to let her play with them and do the fun stuff.

Emily moved out to the living room but froze on the spot when she saw

who had walked in the door. Before her, wearing military fatigues, freshly cut black hair, and a warm smile stood her father. He was clean shaven, scars along the right side of his face and every bit the strong soldier that Emily idolized him as. Emily let out a high pitched shout, nearly jumping up and down. "Daddy!" She ran forward and he knelt down to pull her into his arms in a tight hug. Jason, who had heard Emily's shout came running out. Her father opened one of his arms enough to pull his son into the hug as well. They stayed in the entry way for some time, just enjoying be a family all in the same place for the first time and a long while.

13. 013 Twisted

****013 Twisted****

****Character: The ODSS****

Eleven soldiers stowed away their supplies in their new footlockers. They didn't speak, none of them sure what they should say. They'd all just been sent here, not sure who all these other people were but being informed that they'd be working with them for the foreseeable future.

"All right, I'll break the ice." Tym took a step toward the center aisle of the barracks. "I'm Tym Mackros and if you need any evidence burned, I'm your man."

The others all just looked at him, apparently not wanting to take part in the classic first-day-of-school activity. "All right, I'll ask the question I think we're all wondering." Luke turned his gaze toward the only woman in the room. "Why the hell is a chick in the men's barracks. Unless you're like a pre op tranny or something."

The woman was across the room before Luke could react. Her fist hit his stomach and he doubled over, allowing her to driver her elbow down on his back. "You want to say that again, ass hole?"

"Damn, I could have made a lot of money off of that. Next time don't be so quick to hit him." Peter shook his head and Emily frowned at him. "I mean if you had waited then I could have taken bets on who was going to win and they all would have bet against you so I would have gotten a ton of credits."

"I'm not here for you to profit off of. I'm here to be an ODST." Emily lifted her foot and put it against the cot, suddenly pushing the cot toward Peter.

The man jumped out of the way, onto another cot but rolling across it and hitting another of the soldiers. "Hey, come on, man. I don't want to be a part of you getting your ass kicked by a girl." Matthew pushed Peter away from him.

"I don't really think he meant to hit you. I mean, I think his goal was to do something cool and roll away from the attack but he's an idiot and failed miserably." James chuckled a bit and Peter shot him an annoyed look.

"Does anyone know at all why we're all here? I mean, I haven't been

told anything." David sat down on his cot and felt the sheets, frowning at how stiff the cot was.

"If anyone has a datapad I could hack in and find out what's going on. They took mine away after I changed one of the Sergeant's military picture to be a pig on a motor bike." Patrick scowled, not happy with his property having been taken away.

"I've got one that you could use." Max, who was sitting on the cot beside Patrick's reached into his footlocker and found his datapad, handing it over to Patrick. "Just don't break it. I've got a lot of medical studies on there and I'm only like part way through reading them."

Luke had finally gotten himself up onto his cot though he was still leaning over. "So then you're a medic? What are you doing in ODS training then? Flunked out of medical school?"

"Are you always an ass or are you just trying to get beaten up bad enough on the first day that you get sent home?" Peter frowned at the man, moving around and sliding his cot back into place.

"Do I need to break your nose?" Peter turned to Emily as she spoke, ready to tell her that he hadn't done anything wrong. He stopped when he realized that she wasn't talking to him. She was talking to another man who was on the cot beside a blond haired man who hadn't said anything.

"What? No, what did I do to get threatened?" Tobias looked to the silent man for assistance but the man didn't seem to care at all. Tobias groaned and turned his attention back to Emily who was taking a few steps to move around the cot. Tobias put his hands up, trying to stop any attack.

"You've been staring at me for a while. What's your problem?" Emily crossed her arms over her chest and waited for an answer.

"I was just thinking about something you said." Emily stared at him, waiting for more of a reply. "I mean you said you were sent here for ODS training. That's what I was told as well. Is that what you were told?" He looked to the silent man and the other soldier only nodded. "Well where's all the other trainees. Eleven is too small for this base and I haven't seen any other soldiers."

"You know he has a point," Tym spoke up. "When I went to normal boot we were met by a drill instructor. Here I just sort of showed up and they told me to go here. I haven't seen any other boot groups and usually there should be at least a few."

"That's what's bugging me. I mean, was anyone told anything?" No one said anything so Tobias continued. "There doesn't even seem to be any of us that are in charge. If none of us are here for anything other than training, then who's going to train us?"

"First names." The soldiers all looked to the silent man who had finally spoken. "Our fatigues only have our first names on them." The other soldiers moved to their footlockers to check.

"Damn, he's right." Tobias looked down at his first name stitched on the patch. "Why wouldn't they put our last names? My last uniform had

only my last name, not my first."

"You know, I've heard rumors that when ONI recruits people into secret programs or experiments they remove their last name so it's harder to trace the soldiers used and that way the scientist don't feel as attached." Patrick moved from his footlocker back to his datapad, getting to work. "It will take me a bit longer if I have to hack ONI security."

"So wait, are you saying you think this might be some sort of experiment?" James looked around at the others. "That's really twisted. I mean, dropping us off with no information against our will to be a part of some experiment."

"That's ONI for you," Emily muttered. "Better just make the best of a crappy situation." She lay down on her bed and glanced over at the man beside her before turning her gaze to the ceiling. "I'm Emily, by the way. Shouldn't be that hard for you Neanderthals to remember as I am the only girl."

"Emily?" The man beside her paused for a moment. "Edward." Emily looked to him and nodded, acknowledging that she now knew his name.

"I'm Tobias, and that was pretty good, earlier. I mean, I've never seen someone move that fast. Maybe you could slow yourself down a bit and I could spar with you."

"We'll see about it. I don't know what's going to happen next though I look forward to finding a chance to kick your ass." Emily smirked at him, obviously looking forward to a fight.

14. 014 Echo

****014 Echo****

****Character: Luke****

"Hello!" Luke listened intently as he heard the shout echo back to him on the cave walls. He grinned, enjoying the sound. "You know it's because of echoes that bats can fly. Some ships also use sonar to find object around them that they might not be able to see with other sensors?"

"You relate everything back to flying, don't you?" Mitt, Luke's friend since he was just a little kid was laughing as well. "You want to go in? Maybe we'll find some bats and you can chat with them about flying." He looked around at the open cave and smirked. "You know this might be a great place to bring girls. It looks nice, seems like it will have a good view of the sunset. They'd be putty in our hands."

"Yeah, a perfect place." Luke looked away from his friend and into the darkness. He took a deep breath, hoping that Mitt wouldn't notice his lack of enthusiasm. The thing was Luke wasn't all that interested in women. Unlike Mitt and his classmates Luke didn't feel attracted to the girls that he sat near in class. Instead he found himself more interested in the boys. He was fairly sure something was wrong, broken in him that was making him feel this way about the wrong

gender.

"So do you want to check it out or not?" Mitt frowned at Luke, confused by his actions. "Are you all right? I mean you've been acting odd lately."

Luke contemplated telling him. He had no idea how Mitt would react if he found out that Luke wasn't into girls. He was a bit afraid that he would think him a freak and no longer want to be friends. Then again, maybe Mitt would know what was wrong. Maybe it was an illness that he needed to see a doctor about.

"Are you sick? You're just staring at nothing in silence." Mitt reached out and put a hand against Luke's forehead. He couldn't help but blush at the contact. "Well you don't feel like you have a fever."

Luke made a decision right then and there. He trusted Mitt more than anyone in the worlds, and he was sure his friend wouldn't abandon him when he needed the help. "I think there's something wrong with me." Mitt furrowed his brow and waited for Luke to continue. "I know that everyone in our class has started dating and getting into girls, but I'm not. I'm not interested in them."

"Oh, don't worry, buddy. I'm sure eventually you'll come around and hit puberty like the rest of us. Then you'll become a man and start having man urges and all that junk they keep telling us in health class." Mitt grinned, brushing off the entire thing.

"No, I do have the urges, just not toward women." The look that Mitt got on his face didn't inspire confidence in Luke. "I feel those urges, but for the guys in our class."

Mitt took a step away from Luke and he felt hurt by the action. "What do you mean you like guys? Guys aren't supposed to like guys."

"But I do. I don't know why but I do." Luke was starting to feel scared. Mitt wasn't reacting the way he had hoped he would. He had hoped for support, but that was far from what he was getting.

Mitt shook his head, taking another step back away from Luke. "There's something really wrong with you. My dad said guys that liked guys were evil." Mitt frowned at Luke and then pointed at Luke. "That means you're evil."

"No, I'm not evil." Luke panicked. This was what he hadn't wanted to have happen. He was trying to regain control of the situation, though he had no real idea how. "I'm still the same person, I just like guys."

"No, you're evil. You like guys so that means you're a sinner like my dad said. Sinners are evil." Mitt shook his head a bit faster and then turned, running off.

Luke stood at the entrance of the cave, staring in the direction that his friend had gone. He didn't know how things had gone so wrong. He didn't know what Mitt had been talking about when he said he was evil. He was so confused and the only person he'd trusted to help him through it had just told him he was a sinner and run off leaving him alone. He cursed the fact that he couldn't just be normal like all

the other guys and be attracted to girls.

15. 015 Soothe

015 Soothe

Character: Edward

Edward stood under the water, eyes closed as he let it wash away the day. The warm liquid ran over his body, soothing away a hard day. Edward always enjoyed the feel of water raining down on him. He felt calm under the water, letting it just fall over his skin. He also liked how fresh and knew things were when the rain was done. The ways scents were stronger and seemed to give the whole world a fresh feel.

Edward turned off the water and just stood in the shower for a few seconds, watching the last few drops drip from the shower head. He then pushed the shower door aside and got out, grabbing a towel and drying off a bit before slinging it over his shoulder and walking out into his apartment. Above he could hear a couple fighting but he'd gotten used to that. They fought often and he tried not to listen. Their business was their own as long as they stayed out of his.

Edward moved over to his dresser and pulled a drawer open, grabbing a pair of pants and underwear. He slipped them on and moved over to his bed. He could have decided not to bother with pants or underwear, as it didn't seem likely that anyone would come to visit. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry. He sat on the clean blue sheets, pulling the towel up over his head and trying to dry his hair a bit more.

He tossed the towel to the side and stared across the room at the mirror on the wall. He frowned, realizing that he'd let his hair get a bit long. He made a note to go get a haircut. He lay back on his bed and grabbed the remote from his bedside table. A click and the screen came to life, set to the local news as always. The reporters might not be all that great and it was low production value but it was informative, for the most part. They did get stories or information wrong from time to time, but usually it was only small fact.

When the news cast got to the sports Edward clicked the screen off. Sports weren't important to him and the only thing after that would be the feel good piece of the day. He stood from his bed and moved to the kitchen to make some food for the night. He cooked up a simple spiced chicken with green beans on the side. Edward sat down at his table and ate. He got part way through his food before he set his knife and fork down, staring across the table at the empty seat.

Something felt wrong, maybe missing. That didn't make sense though. Edward had lived on his own before he was eighteen and at nineteen he was very used to this. Then why did he feel like someone should be there? He wasn't old enough to be craving a companion, maybe he was just in need of sating his physical desires.

Edward was pulled from his thoughts as there was a knock on his door.

He got up and moved to the door, grabbing the 9mm that he kept on the table beside the door and moving so that it would be hidden behind his back. He opened the door slightly and saw that it was the woman who lived down the hall from him. He opened the door fully and waited for her to speak.

The woman looked him over and Edward ignored it. He was used to women eyeing him and he wasn't going to fault her. After all he knew she was a single mother who had lived down the hall for about a year. She finally pulled her eyes from his body and looked to his face. Edward put on a friendly smile that fooled people every time. The woman returned the smile and finally spoke. "Hello, I know that you might not know me but the thing is my daughter is selling cookies for her Girl Scout troop. I was wondering if you'd like to buy some."

Edward had gotten fairly good at playing the good neighbor. If he had his way he'd never have to talk to any of these people but that wasn't considered normal and they would think him strange if he wasn't at least a bit nice. "Well, I'm not a big fan of cookies. Though how about I give you the money for a box and you let your daughter get one on me. Consider it a thank you for the nice paper flowers that she put in the lobby last month."

The woman smiled and moved just a bit closer. "That's so kind of you. She'll want to come by and thank you herself when she finds out. I'll come back to get the payment when they're being delivered."

Edward paused for a fraction of a second, making a decision. This woman would be an easy pick up. She was obviously attracted to him and she seemed like she'd be able to satisfy his needs. He decided against it. It would make things awkward if they met in the halls and Edward wasn't looking for anything more than a single encounter. Not to mention he was fairly certain that this odd missing feeling he was having wasn't going to be fixed by simply sleeping with a woman. "Well, I should get back to my dinner."

"Oh, I'm sorry that I disturbed your dinner. Thank you again." The woman backed up a bit, seeing that Edward wasn't interested. She turned to move on to the next door.

Edward shut his door, locking it as always. He put the gun back on the table beside the door and returned to his dinner. He glanced across the table at the empty seat. He looked around the room and realized that it wasn't just the empty seat. Everything made him feel like something was wrong. He frowned, not understanding it. He pushed the feeling to the side and returned his attention to his dinner.

16. 016 Fight

****016 Fight****

****Characters: Emily/Edward****

Emily stood on the sparring mat in a loosely ready fighting stance. Edward stood across from her at the ready. They were both waiting for the other to make the first move. Emily decided that she'd have to take the offensive and moved forward. She didn't slow herself down, striking with her right fist as quickly as she could.

Before she'd even really made any move to punch Edward had already moved to block it. This was why Emily didn't slow herself down. She and Edward knew each other well enough that he was able to react to her moves before she could make them and Emily had the reaction time to be able to dodge his attacks. For each of them there really wasn't anyone else on the team that put up a better fight than their partner.

Edward moved to grab Emily, knowing that he'd had an easier time winning if he turned this into a grappling match. Emily was able to move out of the way of his grab. She aimed what would be the first of several hits but Edward side stepped out of the way of the hit. Emily was anticipating it and moved forward, something she usually wouldn't do. Her hand moved forward, grabbing the front of his shirt. Unfortunately for Emily Edward was expecting the out of the ordinary move.

Edward fell backward, pulling Emily down with him. He knew Emily was stubborn and wouldn't release his shirt easily. He stuck his leg out a bit and pushed her up, over his head as he landed. His shirt tore as she took a chunk of the fabric with her as she rolled over him and to her feet.

Edward moved to his feet in quick fluid motions that left him at the ready to strike. "Did you really need to tear my shirt? You could have let go." Edward glanced down at the torn part of his shirt.

"Well if you don't like it then take it off." Emily tossed the bit of fabric that had been in her hand to the side. She moved back into a ready position, this time taking a more defensive stance to indicate she wouldn't attack. At least not yet.

"If I did then you would be at a disadvantage in a grappling match as you would have no clothing to grab onto. I prefer if our fights are more fair on both sides." Edward stripped the shirt and tossed it to the side, moving back into a fighting stance.

"You do realize that you're the only one complaining about it, right? If it really means that much then I can take off my shirt too, even the field." Emily tugged on the shoulder strap of her shirt, more to indicate to Edward that there was nothing underneath.

"If you were to do that then when we grapple it wouldn't be classified as sparring anymore." Edward's face was blank and unreadable to the normal person. To Emily there were little physical signs that showed otherwise. His stance had relaxed just a little bit, indicating that his attention was partially thinking of the other activity.

"Well, we're really only doing this to get some exercise. Either way we get a work out. Which would you prefer?" Emily relaxed from her stance, watching Edward carefully. He was obviously thinking it over and she shook her head. "You really don't know which you'd prefer to do?"

"I enjoy both activities with you, and you are the only person who can do either of them properly with me. It is a difficult choice," Edward admitted.

Emily sighed and moved over to him, placing a light hand on Edward's shoulder. "I know which I'd prefer to do." Edward's body relaxed and Emily moved. He leg swept his out from under him and he went crashing to the ground. A second later she was straddling him.

Edward lay on the ground, looking up at her. "So which did you chose? From this position we could take either course of action." Edward's eyes traveled down over her body and then back up to her face. "Though at the moment I am having a preference of actions."

Emily leaned down, pressing her lips to his. Edward returned the kiss and the two marines began a different kind of workout.

17. 017 Naked

****017 Naked****

****Characters: Peter/Luke****

Peter sat on the locker room bench, checking over the bandages on his shoulder. He was careful not to move it too much as the burns underneath still hurt a bit and he didn't really want to cause himself pain for no reason. The bandages seemed to be holding up pretty well and in no time he'd be fully healed.

Peter didn't look up as someone else moved in. He knew who it was from the way he walked. "You know this is all because of you." Peter frowned and turned around, glaring at Luke's back.

Luke didn't really reply right away, just opened his locker before sitting down on the bench. "It's your own fault. I told you to sit down. Not my fault you can't listen to instructions." Luke pulled off his shoes and put them into the locker. "If you'd stayed in your seat you wouldn't have nearly fallen out of the vehicle and been hit by that stray shot."

"If I'd sat down than who would watch your back when that ghost was trying to get us?" Peter grabbed his shirt out of the locker and flinched a bit as he tried to raise his arm up enough to put it on. His shoulder burned as it moved too high.

Luke sighed and stood up, moving around the bench to stand before Peter. He held his hand out for the shirt and Peter reluctantly handed it over. "You know I was planning on making a jump ahead that it wouldn't be able to follow. We didn't need to be covered. Don't you have any faith in my evasive skills?"

"I do when you're in a pelican or something. Warthogs are different. You forget that there's no seatbelt or anything in the back. I mean if I hadn't grabbed the rear of the jeep then I would have been thrown out. You need to watch the bumps." Peter held his arms out and Luke slipped the shirt over them, making sure his hands went through the arm holes.

"You should keep a better hold on the gun. You would think after all these fights you'd learn to adjust more quickly on what you're shooting at, or at least learn that when the driver says to get down you should. This is just like that time with the hornet."

"This is nothing like that time," Peter snapped. "Besides, that was your fault for not remembering you had someone on your wing. You also should have been watching for fliers coming around the back."

"That's where you should have been looking. I was taking care of what was ahead of me, you should have had my back. Instead you were sniping ground forces." Luke pulled the shirt back and struggled to try to get it correctly over Peter's head.

"I was covering the ground team." Peter grunted in pain. "Damn, haven't you ever put a shirt on? Stop forcing my arm up, that hurts."

"I'm usually taking your shirt off, not putting it on. It's more difficult to get it over your head." Luke growled a bit in frustration and pulled the shirt back off of. "Forget it. That thing isn't going on as long as you're bandaged up. You look better without it anyway." Luke tossed it back into the locker and turned his attention back to Peter.

"You know I can't just walk about the ship without a shirt on. I'll get in trouble with the Sergeant and I really don't want to deal with her after what happened on that last planet." Peter tried to reach around Luke, into his locker, to get the shirt back, but he couldn't quite reach.

Luke laughed and Peter glared up at him. "Sorry, it's just you look perfect from this angle." Luke laughed as he crossed his arms. Peter didn't let the comment go. His good arm moved, slamming his fist into Luke's stomach. The other man double over and looked Peter straight in the eyes. "Well, you're injured, so I'll let it go this one time."

Peter relaxed a bit from his anger and looked at his partner. His expression seemed annoyed, but the man's heart wasn't in it. Luke wasn't trying to pick a fight for no reason. He wanted to take his mind off of things. "Luke, if you're that upset about what happened on the planet, you can talk to me about it."

Luke frowned and shook his head. "Nothing's wrong." Peter just stared at him and Luke caved in. Peter was the one man he could really trust. "I feel bad about that pilot. I should have stopped him from making that run to look for survivors. I could have saved his life."

"At the time you didn't know that and there could have been more survivors. Maybe you could have saved his life, but you had no way of knowing that anti-air wraith was there and would shoot him down. He died like a proper soldier, trying to save others. You can't beat yourself up over things that you should have been able to do in hindsight."

Luke let out a long breath and leaned forward, resting his forehead against Peter's chest. Peter's hand moved up to the back of his neck. It wasn't often that the two of them had moments like this. They were at peace, open, baring their souls. Luke lifted his head from the other man's chest. "All right, that's enough emotion. You going to get naked or do I have to strip you myself?"

Peter sighed and leaned forward, kissing his partner. "You're going to have to work for it." He smirked as he felt Luke's arms move around his waist.

18. 018 Push

****Prompt: 018 Push****

****Character: Luke****

Luke sat alone under a tree in his middle school's courtyard. He stared down at the screen of his datapad, reading an article about a new sort of ship they were going to start making called a Hornet. They looked rather interesting, though he was a bit sad to find that they would really only be used by the military. This was how he spent most of his lunches. It had been since three years ago when his secret had gotten out.

Mitt had told his entire grade about the fact that he was gay, and since then they hadn't wanted to be friends with him. He hadn't realized it but he lived in one of the worst places in the galaxy to be homosexual. His planet was known for their strict religious beliefs, one of which was that being gay was wrong. He had nowhere to turn any more, and no friends. Some of the girls would still talk to him, but over all they avoided him. Even his own father had become distant. He didn't feel like his father disliked him, just didn't know how to handle the news.

It was fine with Luke. It had shown him who was really a friend and who wasn't. He'd gotten a job at a local super market, and a book store in town that he worked weekends at. He was saving up money. Maybe one day he'd move away from here, or take a trip to a big city and find one of the support groups that he'd heard about for people like him.

The reason he really didn't care was because he'd already filled the void left by spending time with friends. He did school work, and his grades had shown the effort. He had looked into flight schools, and high grades didn't hurt when applying. If he saved up enough money, he'd even be able to afford it all on his own. Then he could go anywhere; enjoy having all of space as the limit to where he can journey.

Luke frowned as a shadow moved over him and he realized that it wasn't a cloud. He looked up to see a boy who had to have been an eighth grader. He didn't know why the other boy was there, but he moved crouch. "Can I help you?" Luke asked.

"You're Luke?" Luke nodded and the older boy smiled. "Hi, I'm Martin. You can't help me, but I might be able to help you." He held out a paper and Luke took it. He frowned down at the site that was written down on the paper. "When I was in a position like you, they really helped me." The older boy smiled and stood up, turning to walk away.

"Wait." The older boy stopped and Luke stood up. "What do you mean a situation like me?" He didn't know this kid, or what this site he'd been given was even about.

"I mean you're not like the other boys. You aren't trying to get dates with the girls. Every time you go to church you hear about how you're wrong and evil because you were born the way you were. Sitting alone outside while everyone is enjoying lunch insides. Yeah, I know that one." He motioned toward the paper. "That site can really help."

"What is it?" He looked at the address but it looked like nothing but a string of numbers and letters.

"It's a support network. There are communities like ours still around, or people who are having trouble deciding when to come out to religious families. They're very understanding." Martin smiled at him. "I mean, sure, it's accepted in 90% of the Earth colonies, but there are still pocket places like this that don't accept it. Eventually they'll help you realize that these people who don't accept you are just stuck in the past. Like stone age past." Martin laughed and Luke couldn't help but smile. "Though I have to say, you seem to be doing well with it."

Luke shrugged. "I am who I am, and I've accepted it. My friends are not a big loss. It's their problem if they don't want to be friends with me. When I become a famous pilot, they'll all see that they were the idiots cause they can't hit me up for money." He laughed a bit and moved over as Martin sat down beside him.

"So you want to be a pilot one day? What kind, commercial, military, space?" Martin settled in and relaxed against the tree with Luke. It was the first time in a while that Luke had felt like he really had a friend. They sat under the tree each lunch for the rest of the school year and just talked. It was the best year of school that Luke would ever have.

19. 019 Alive

****Prompt: 019 Alive****

****Character:Edward****

Edward sat at the bar with the group of soldiers. They were the best source of information he had so he was trying to make friends with them. He'd been buying pitchers of beer all night not only to get their trust but to get them a little drunk. Drunk people had looser tongues, let information slip easier. It hadn't been hard to get them to talk to him. He had simply approached them a man who wanted to buy some soldiers a drink. They'd invited him to sit with them and had right away started to make friends.

Edward sat back, a fake friendly smile plastered on his face, listening to one of the soldiers tell a story from a mission. "The fools all hunkered down in the building as though it would actually save them from the tank. One blast from the main cannon and they would have all been dead. That was when we got the order that they had something inside we had to recover. That meant we couldn't use the tank, had to go in on foot."

"What are you complaining about?" a second soldier asked. The second soldier was more muscular than the rest, sticking out. His hair was

shaved down and his upper body seemed almost too big for his shirt. There were scars on his hands and Edward would bet there were more hidden. "You didn't have to go in and get it. That was my squad's job." The man turned toward Edward before continuing. "I'm part of an ODS'T squad that specializes in retrieving things and killing anyone hat gets in our way. We were sent in to get it back. See rebels think they can handle the UNSC but they somehow always forget about the ODS'T. They're never ready for the biggest and baddest humanity has to put forward when a job needs to get done."

Edwards attention was now focused on the man's words. This was a chance to learn something new from a person that was a part of it. Edward wouldn't openly admit it. It he was also genuinely interested. He'd heard a lot of rumor about the ODS'T but had never been sure what was true.

"We threw some flash grenades in, couldn't use frags because that would risk damaging the objective. With the enemy distracted and impaired we went charging in. Basically if we find someone and they aren't in ODS'T armor we fill them with lead. We clear out the place and the other soldiers come in behind us. We clear the path, but it's the job of the other soldiers to retrieve the object," the ODS'T explained. "In the end there were twenty four dead rebels and no injuries on our side."

"I've heard of the ODS'T but I've never met one or heard them talk about their duties." Edward leaned a bit toward the man, indicating he was interested in the conversation. "So how'd you become an ODS'T?"

"Well you can do it several ways. I signed up for the training but sometimes people are pulled from normal training to ODS'T if they show they've got the right stuff." The man looked Edward over and smirked. "Why you asking?"

"Well, my current line of work has started to bore me. I used to go to work and I enjoyed the challenge of it, but nowâ€¦I need something new." Edward's words were light and casual.

"Well, being an ODS'T isn't easy. You could give it a try, but the training would likely eat you alive. It's not for the faint of heart." The large man leaned a bit toward Edward. "Though if you can somehow manage not to die or drop out, there's nothing like being an ODS'T." The marine's gaze turned a bit distant, as though not really looking at Edward. "There's nothing like the feel of being dropped from orbit, charging into a building, or that feeling when you pull the trigger. Makes you feel alive."

Edward smiled charmingly. How easily he was able to convince people he was a normal person with a pleasant disposition. "So basically you're legal paid killers?"

The ODS'T shrugged. "Some call us that. What we do, the people we kill, are legal, and we do get a pay check." The scowled and leaned a bit on the table. "Most people have a problem with that."

"Well, I'm not one of them. I understand that the UNSC and their actions are necessary. Only fools think that order can be kept without spilling a little blood." Edward motioned toward the pitcher on the table. "I know it's hard work, that's why I'm treating you all

to some drinks. A civilian should treat the soldiers who keep him safe every once in a while."

The first soldier laughed and raised his mug. "I hear that. See, I told you it was all right to let him join us." He elbowed the soldier beside him and the other man just glared at him.

"Damn, you're so drunk you don't even remember you were the one that objected." The annoyed soldier shook his head. "We should get him back to the barracks." The soldier stood up and grabbed his friend's arm. He and another soldier dragged the drunk soldier to his feet.

Edward watched them get up and move out of the bar. The ODST hung back watching his friends leave. He turned back to Edward and looked him over. "You really serious about being an ODST?"

Edward paused for a second as he decided now to answer. He let the cheerful smile drop from his face, changing to a blank, emotionless mask. "I am looking for a change in my employment and a challenge such as the ODST seems to be ideal."

The ODST narrowed his gaze then shook his head. "Fine, but keep in mind, normal marine training is like a walk in a sunny park compared to the hell of ODST training." Edward nodded, not really concerned with the warning. The ODST nodded back and turned, moving out bar. Edward sat back in his seat, contemplating what course of action to take.

20. 020 New

****Prompt: 020 New****

****Character: Emily/Edward****

Edward ran through the forest, just trying to keep up with Emily who moved so quickly between the trees he was slowly falling behind. He didn't dare call out to her, that would give away their position. They were being chased by Matthew and James who had ruined their attempt to ambush Tym and Tobias.

The ODSS had been dropped off in the forest and, as their squad leader had put it, had to hunt all the other teams like a battle royal, but without all the actual killing. They'd been given no weapons, no armor, and no supplies. It had already been three days and so far max, David, and Patrick were out. Edward had no idea about Luke and Peter, he had yet to see them.

Emily took a sharp turn and suddenly she was gone. He heard the sound of rocks falling over other rocks and stopped, looking down. Emily had turned and the ground given out under her causing her to fall to the bottom of a hillside. Edward moved down after her, being careful to control his decent as he moved down the hillside of loose rocks. He reached Emily and found her struggling to get to her feet. He didn't stop, just picked her up and ran.

He ran along the open space until he finally spotted a river nearby. He turned toward it and without hesitation jumped in. Once they were under the surface Edward had to grab onto a root on the riverbed to

keep them from floating up. He looked around for any shelter they might be able to use to hide. He searched until he found a small ledge that the two of them could use for cover. Edward pulled them over and they surfaced, only enough that their heads were out of the water.

They stayed there for a quarter of an hour until Edward was sure the other team was gone. He pulled the two of them up and out of the water, moving to his feet. Emily remained on the ground, her hand feeling her ankle. Edward knelt down beside her, still keeping an eye out for enemies. "Are you all right?"

"My ankle hurts, probably sprained. I need to let it rest," Emily answered. She tried to stand up but she couldn't put any weight on her foot and nearly fell back down. Edward caught her before she fell and he turned around. Emily didn't question him, didn't argue, just climbed onto his back and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Edward stuck to the shadows and whatever cover he could manage before finally finding a large tree and using a space in its roots to take cover. He set Emily down carefully and turned his attention to her ankle.

"It just needs to rest," she insisted. Edward ignored her Focusing on her ankle as he ran his fingers over the skin to be sure everything was correct. Once he was sure that there wasn't any serious injury he moved to sit beside her.

They sat in silence for some time, not really sure what to do with their time. Finally, Emily spoke up. "So are we going to talk about what happened?" she wouldn't look at him as she spoke.

Edward wasn't sure what to say. He wasn't used to being uncomfortable, particularly around Emily but here he was, uncomfortable. This was new and he didn't like it. He wasn't sure if he wanted to talk about what had happened or not. He didn't know what would happen if they talked about it. He and Emily had a careful balance to the way they worked. One bad fight, something like what had happened, and it could ruin that balance.

"We can't just ignore it forever, Edward. It happened and we have to talk about it." Emily turned toward him and Edward caught the annoyed look out of the corner of his eyes. "Was it really so bad you want to ignore it?"

"Don't make it like that, Emily. You know that's not the problem." Edward turned his gaze to her, looking into those angry eyes and leaned over, gently touching his lips to hers. He pulled away a few seconds later and the anger was gone from Emily's face. "There is no need to talk about it."

Emily stared at him for a moment and got his meaning. The small action was all he really needed to fix what fears and uncertainty had been threatening to ruin the system they had worked out so perfectly. She leaned toward him and pressed her lips to his cheek softly before setting her head on his shoulder. Emily curled up a bit and settled in for the wait, shutting her eyes to allow herself to get some rest. Edward allowed her to lean against him, he would let her sleep for now, knowing that before dawn they'd have to be up and moving again.

21. 021 Born

****Prompt: 021 born****

****Character: Tym****

Tym smiled as he watched the new born calf struggle to its feet. It had fallen several times already but it just kept getting back up. He watched it for a while until his brother returned, towel in hand. He handed it over to Tym.

"What are you going to do?" Mal asked, watching his brother closely. Tym had birthed a few calf's and knew enough that he was Mal's chosen source of information.

"I'm going to clean him up." Tym moved over to the calf which inched toward him, not sure if he was friend or enemy. Tym put the towel over the calf and dried off some of the birthing fluid. He nearly knocked the creature over but it remained standing, barely.

"So what are we going to call him?" Mal asked, watching the young creature with fascination. The calf called to its mother who responded and gave the baby direction to stumble. The mother was tied to a close by hitch, still resting from the exertion of giving birth.

"We aren't going to name him," Tym corrected. "We don't really raise them for slaughter, mainly milk so a male isn't very useful."

"If males aren't very useful hen why do we have Bruce and Chuck?" Mal's face was scrunched up as he tried to understand. Tym was actually surprised their father hadn't already explained it to him.

"Well Bruce and Chuck are breeding steer. See you can't make a calf without a male and female, so we keep two males on the farm for some genetic diversity. Dad says that they'll both have a few more years giving us calves before well have to sell them and replace them with new males to keep the stock healthy." Tym really didn't want to be more specific than that about it. He didn't want to push Mal to have the same birds and the bees discussion sooner than he had to. Well as Tym remembered there hadn't been a lot of talking, rather a live demonstration by Bruce and a female cow named Sally.

"So you mean that we're just going to sell that guy?" Mal pointed to the calf which had made its way almost half way to its mother.

"Yeah, when he's old enough we will. He might end up at slaughter or hell be a breeding steer like our males. It all counts on is anyone needs a new male for breeding or not." Tym had had this explained by his father to him many time but all of it seemed brand new to Mal. Maybe his father was still expecting him to take over the farm rather than his younger brother.

"So he might end up dead." Mal watched he calf as it finally reached its mother, much more sturdy on its legs. "Is that why we aren't naming him?"

"Well we aren't naming him because he isn't going to stay. There's no reason to name him and get attached when he's going to be sold." Tym watched as the mother stretched out to touch her nose to the calf. "After all if it goes to slaughter then we don't have a name to honk about having died and if he's a breed steer then the family that buys him gets to name him."

Mal frowned as he watched the calf lay down beside its mother. "Fine."

Tym felt bad for his brother. He liked the farm and sad truths like the fate of the calf always made him so sad. "Come on, we can leave them be for a bit. Mom might need some help cooking dinner." Tym moved to leave the barn hearing his brothers footsteps behind him. His brother would get over it and hopefully accept the truth or else Tym might get stuck with this damn farm after all.

22. 022 Murmur

****Prompt: 022 murmur****

****Character: Shadow Blade****

Enre made his way through the keep, ignoring the gossip and murmurs of the sangheili around him. He didn't care what they'd heard from forth party sources, he would go directly to the one person who would know the truth.

He reached her door and knocked quickly, speaking loud enough that she would be able to hear him. "Ahwu, it is Enre. I wish to speak to you."

There was a pause and he waited, fighting the urge to pace in front of the door. Finally it slid open and he stepped in, not waiting for an invitation. Only when the door had slid shut did he turn to look at her. His questions of how the meeting had gone were all answered with one look at her. Her jaw was spread in a sigh of agitation, muscles tense as though ready to lash out at whatever might be in her way, and there was an angry spark in her eyes that he'd only see when she was showing up a fellow sangheili who questioned her skill.

"They did not grant you permission." Enre's words came out as a growl. Sometimes he questioned why they let the elders who were stuck in the old ways lead. The young could be just as strong and be willing to move forward.

"They are fools, Enre. They deny me my right to serve simply because of my gender. Old fools, all of which I could beat from one side of the Keep to the other with just my fists." Ahwu started to pace, huffing every once in a while as she ranted. "They refused to even allow me a chance to prove myself. They said there's never been a female warrior from our Keep and there's no reason to start now."

"So they refused you a chance because they have refused all before you? Such thinking will leave our people stuck in old ways. We cannot advance and become stronger if we don't allow change." Enre turned

toward the door.

Ahwu's hand on his arm was the only thing that stopped him. "Don't do that, Enre. You'll only get in trouble and that will only make problems." Ahwu pulled him away from the door and he allowed it. She could do it by force but it was less painful to cooperate.

"I can't let them get away with this, Ahwu," Enre argued. "They let Yors be a soldier but they deny you because of out of date tradition." He allowed Ahwu to pull him toward the window. "We want to change our people, don't we? Then taking a stand is what we must do."

"Enre there is a time and place for standing for what you believe in. Now is not that time and not over this. We will help our people break free from these ancient ideas a different way."

Now she had Enre's attention. She would only let this go if there were a backup plan. "What is our next step?" Enre asked.

Ahwu's hand moved from Enre's arm to take the male sangheili's hand. "Our next step is marriage as we always planned. I heard that some young sangheili was assigned to a special squad of soldiers. Handpicked by the prophets."

Enre took her other hand in his free one. "I heard that as well, I believe the rank was Zealot." Enre leaned a bit toward her. "Think that's a high enough rank to take a wife?"

Ahwu stared at him, stunned. "They made you a Zealot? That's enough for several wives. Why would they increase your rank so much? Are the prophets now allowed to disregard our rank traditions just because they are prophets?"

Enre was a bit amused by the way she was always sable to turn the conversation toward her dislike for tradition or their religion. "I am not in a normal Zealot position. We are now at war with some other species, and as I understand it their planets may contain relics that are considered holy. The team I am a part of is small, will drop onto the planets and try to find any sign of relics and retrieve them or mark their location. I realized why it was that they were chosen."

Ahwu huffed, not happy with the war as it was a religious war and all the more because she wasn't allowed to fight. "Why were you chosen?"

"Because we can see, have little faith in the gods." Ahwu examined him, not understanding what he meant. "We are going to be the first to reach artifacts, have to be willing to sacrifice smaller ones for larger finds and do things that might be considered defiling holy ground. Those who are faithful could not do such things."

"I will admit the prophets aren't complete fools," Ahwu conceded. "Very well, let them help us on our path to growth." It was Enre's turn to be confused by his partner's words. "You have rank enough that you can spread your strength and wisdom on to the next generation. Fight this pointless war and destroy the enemy swiftly. If you do well, are honorable, then you are sure to become Kiadon. Once we control the keep we will change things, save our species from

stagnation."

Enre grinned in that slightly creepy sangheili way. "Then I have a different reason to visit the Kiadon tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Why delay?" Ahwu asked.

"Because today I was promoted. I would like to spend it celebrating with my closest friend and future wife." Enre squeezed her hands lightly. "Come, we will watch the light fade from the day." With that he led her out of room to find a nice place to watch the sun set.

23. 023 Devious

****Prompt: 023 Devious****

****Character: David****

David hit the last of the buttons and the clock flashed that he was officially off shift. He couldn't get out of the station and onto the streets fast enough. He just wanted to get as far away from his desk and all the paperwork as he could.

There had been an incident earlier in the day, a bomb left in a small coffee shop. There was no time or reason behind the target, it was just a locally owned coffee shop. Well there hadn't seemed to be a motive until they found out that several leaders of Kholo's government were going to make a stop there on their campaign. Though that wasn't for several weeks and there was no reason that they would put it there this early. There had been theories and random guesses in motive but still nothing concrete.

This was how it always went. A bomb was found or went off, a ship was attacked, or someone was taken hostage. The police would investigate but they just didn't have the resources or manpower to handle a proper investigation.

As a result the rebels were making a mess of people's lives, destroying families in senseless violence. They had requested help from the UNSC but they didn't have the soldiers to cover every colony and Kholo was unfortunate enough to not be big enough for it to be helped.

David watched the people outside the station, wondering how many we're rebels with the arrogance to walk along the side of people who were suffering because some group wanted to complain and had no problem killing innocents. It wasn't like they were doing any good. Were they all so blind that they couldn't see that they were just driven by greed or did they know and didn't care?

He turned, heading down the street the same way he walked every day. He lived close enough that getting a car was never really a thought. He liked the walk home anyway, it was a way to feel more in touch with the people. He walked with them, could hear bits of conversation. A woman who was worried about how she was going to get her daughter a good education, a man who was trying to calm his crying wife, assuring her that their child was in a better place, and a teenager worried about a friend who might be on drugs. These were

the problems of the common people, not the things he rebels claimed.

Really Earth didn't take that much from Kholo and the only reason Earth didn't give more aid was an old bid the politicians had made to appease the rebels and had cut off some programs from Earth claiming it would make them more independent. It hadn't worked any way. The rebels wanted complete separation from Earth but the state of the people showed that cutting themselves off from Earth had only proved that they needed Earth to survive.

David stopped, something he never did on his walk home. His gaze turned to two young adult who were arguing. "Come on, they need all the troops they can get and I get a signing bonus for bringing a friend. You know Jackson needs the credits for the treatment."

"No way, man. I'm not throwing my life away for Earth when we should be fighting right here," the other man argued back. David moved toward them and the second man scowled as he came close. "What do you want?"

"First I'd like to correct something. The UNSC would be fighting here to stop the rebellion and return the medical and financial aid if not for the rebels. Second, are you talking about the UNSC?"

"Yeah, I'm trying to convince my friend here to sign up with me," the first man explained.

"How would you know why Earth abandoned us?" The second man cut in.

"They didn't abandon us, we told them we didn't want their help so they backed off. You can't expect them to come running to our rescue and not remember we turned out back on their help. We wanted independence and we got it, and more bombs and death because we let the rebels get their way. Your friend is right, they need everyone they can get, then they could help more colonies. Rather than standing here and placing the blame why not join up and help your friend?" David knew it wasn't really his place to lecture a random stranger but he was tired of the way people pretended to be helpless. They allowed the rebels to do this, let them be ignored even when meeting in a public place.

"Screw you man, you don't know me." The second man flipped David off and stomped away.

"Sorry about him. He never got past his rebellious teenage years," the first man apologized.

"Well he should be careful. He's the kind of guy the rebels pray on. Don't want to see him dead because he lets his anger get the better of him." David decided to shift the topic to what had originally brought him to talk to the men. "So you're going to join the UNSC?"

"Yeah, nothing else I can do. Not good in school, no really great skills, and my family needs the money," the man explained. "You going to join?"

"I'm already a cop," David stated. The man looked disappointed,

probably hoping he could get David to work with him so he could get the bonus. "So is Jackson your brother?"

"Yeah, got some bad burns during an attack. If he can't get some treatment they say his right side will be hindered, maybe even useless." The man looked away from David and let out a long sigh. "But I suppose I'm just happy they he's alive, thanks to the officers like you."

"Which attack?" David asked.

"The bomb that went off at power plant," the man answered.

"I remember that one. Me and my partner Mike responded to it. Place was on fire, lot of injure, even more dead." David frowned as the memory of the charred bodies and people crying out for help surfaced in his mind. He remembered all the children. Mike had snapped right to action, having years of service already and knowing the drill. David had just followed his lead, helped those that were still alive, trying to stall fires long enough for the fire department to come. He remembered the investigation afterwards which had come to such a grim conclusion. The fire suppression system was tampered with and with how many kids had been there it was impossible to believe the rebels didn't know. "I'm guessing that your brother was with the class on a field trip." The man nodded. "That was an awful day. So now you're joining up." David tried to push down the memory but he could still hear Mike shouting orders at him. He shook his head and didn't even think before speaking. "I'll join up."

"What? But you're a cop. You're already doing your part. If this is about my brother I can just try to find someone outside the recruitment center to sign up with me," the man said.

"No, isn't not because of him." David realized he didn't have good arguments or reasons to join that he'd thought over for months. He didn't usually make snap decisions like this and it was unnerving for him to have no crafted argument. "We can't do our part, to many limitations. The UNSC is the only way to get it under control." David searched a bit for the right words but it was had to do it on the fly. "My reasons not important. I want to join."

"Whatever you say, officer. You can follow me to the recruitment office." The man turned and David followed him. He wasn't sure why he'd made this choice, maybe he'd made it some time ago and just hadn't realized it, but he was going to commit now. These people needed to be protected, and he knew the UNSC was the only force that could stop the rebels.

24. 024 Isolation

****Prompt: 024 Isolation****

****Character: Peter****

Peter liked this time of day, when everyone else was at the mess hall eating. It meant that he got some time all to himself to just focus on his training. He knew that in combat he wouldn't get this sort of calm but that didn't mean that he couldn't enjoy his quiet time.

Peter carefully checked each of the stations of the firing range. He'd set up each station with a different weapon and planned on testing himself in their use. He moved to the first of the stations, carefully putting in his ear protection before he picked up the pistol that lay on the counter. He ejected the magazine and checked it before slipping it back in with a satisfying click.

He raised the weapon let out one long breath before he started. He took aim and fired all twelve shots from the pistol. As soon as it was empty he set it down and moved to the next station, a DMR. A proper marksman weapon that could be used at any range though worked best at mid to close range. He emptied it was well and continued on to the next station. Next was an assault rifle, far from his favorite as it lacked accuracy. When the counter read 00 he set it down and moved to the next weapon. This was the last station and his favorite. The SRS99D AM Sniper rifle, a true piece of art. He lifted it with ease and emptied the four rounds in quick succession.

Peter put down the spent rifle and carefully removed the ear protection. He'd just hit the controls to bring the targets closer when someone shouted. "What in hell do you think you're doing on the range, boot?!"

"Target practice, sir." Peter had thought of making a smart ass comment but he didn't really feel like being on latrine duty again so soon. He'd give it another week before he made trouble, at least then he'd miss Mexican night.

"And why aren't you with the other trainees at breakfast?" The drill instructor moved over and picked up the DMR. "You're not even rated to use this weapon let alone a sniper rifle. Some of you damn trainees just don't know your limitations and now you've gone and wasted ammunition."

That annoyed Peter. What he hated the most at this military school was that the instructors all thought they knew better. He didn't mind the rules; he just ignored those that he didn't like so they didn't bother him. The problem was the drill instructors treated them all like kids. Just because he wasn't an adult didn't mean he couldn't handle some simple weapons.

"Hell you could have put your eye out. An injury like that won't get you out of here any time soon. A soldier with one eye can still be a meat shield." The drill instructor was going to continue ranting but stopped as the targets reached each station. Whatever insults he was going to hurl died in the instructor's throat. The man scowled and glared at Peter. "Just get your ass to the mess hall for breakfast."

"Yes, sir," Peter answered a bit more cockily than was really acceptable. Luckily the instructor was focused, staring at the targets Peter had shot. He'd hit all of them in kill zones. Lungs, heart, and head at each station. In Peter's mind he deserved to be a bit cocky for showing the instructor he was wrong.

Peter joined the other trainees at their usual table, once more sitting in the loud conversations of friends, teammates, and enemies. He wished he could go back to the quiet isolation of the firing range. Oh well, he could really just hoped they wouldn't ban him from

the range.

25. 025 Starve

025 Starve

****Character: Peter/Luke****

Peter stared down at the bar of nutrients. He sat back on the partially burned couch, just scowling at the rations bar. The things tasted like crap and were hard as a rock after a while. He had a few days before it turned hard but the taste was still awful.

The ODSS had been in the city for three days, destroying Covenant vehicles and heavy deployments. They'd been doing pretty well and had destroyed a good number of wraiths and a few Phantoms. They hadn't saved any civilians but they were being a pain in the ass for the damn murdering aliens. Right now they were waiting for more targets to arrive. The marines had taken up shelter in a hotel and Peter was taking a slight break in one of the nicer suits.

Luke entered the room, frowning at his partner. "Either the Covies don't have any more or they're sending a big wave at us soon." Luke sat down on the couch beside Peter, resting his arm across his partner's shoulder casually. "Let's hope it's the latter. It will be more fun."

Peter held the ration bar out to Luke. "Want a block of dirt seasoned with slight bits of moss?"

"I'd rather eat whatever paste those squid faces are eating." Luke grinned and leaned toward his partner. "Though there's something else I'd rather eat." The suggestive tone to his voice made it obvious what he meant.

"Sarge told us to keep that stuff off the battlefield." Peter didn't push the arm off of him, just leaned a bit toward his partner. "So you'd rather starve? Neither of those options would probably sustain you."

Luke didn't say anything. He stared across the room at the wall, eyes unfocused. He took a deep breath and turned his attention to Peter. "Fine, I'll take the rations." Peter handed it over and Luke took a small bite. He cringed at the taste and tossed it back to Peter.

Peter took the ration bar and put it away. "Well at least now I don't have to worry about dragging your malnourished body off the battlefield." Peter looked down as Luke's hand moved to his thigh. "Seriously, what's with you? You don't usually touch me like this while we're on a mission." Luke hesitated, looking toward the window to try to avoid Peter. Peter scowled and forced Luke's hand off of him. "Fine, then you don't get to touch me."

Luke sighed and groaned. "You singed at all, from that plasma fire?" Luke tapped his finger on his leg. "You kind of were gone, off the radio for a bit longer than was comfortable for me."

"So you're saying that you're worried about me?" Peter grinned,

knowing that now he had some ammunition against Luke. "Oh, someone's going soft on me. Next you'll be telling me that maybe we should be sitting down at the table with the elites to make peace."

Luke removed his hand and arm from Peter, moving a bit away from him. "You really saying that you think my love for you is the same as being friends with the split lips? You really think that?"

Peter raised an eyebrow. "Who said anything about love?" Luke scowled and Peter could only sigh. "All right, I admit it isn't the same. It was just the only analogy that I could come up with on such short notice."

"Wow, you really suck at quick analogy thinking." Luke sighed and moved back to his partner's side. "I was worried," he admitted. "There was like twelve minutes where we couldn't find you, your sniping spot had been destroyed, and you weren't killing anything. All the signs that something bad has happened."

"Well I had moved before the plasma fire hit, so that's why I wasn't there. As for not killing anything, I was. I found a group of jackals and killed them. Had to bloody my knife. You know how I hate being close to my enemy." Peter smirked; making it clear to Luke that it all wasn't really that big of a deal.

Luke seemed to consider the explanation for a moment before he spoke. "I promise to let it go and not be worried any more if you do that thing you do so well when we finish here." Luke raised an eyebrow and waited for Peter's response.

Peter considered it and finally grinned. "Only if I get to do that thing you only sort of agree with." Luke sighed and held his hand out to shake. Peter took it and they shook hands, sealing the deal. "Shall we make it final with some warm water?" Peter held up his canteen.

"Water? I think I have a better idea." Luke pulled out a pair of small bottles. "I raided a mini-fridge." He held one out for Peter and he took it.

"Oh, it's like Christmas day. I might just do that other thing that you like." Peter broke the bottle open and held it up. They touched the bottles together and downed the alcohol in one gulp.

26. 026 Breakable

****026 Breakable****

****Character: Emily/Edward****

Emily glared at the man on the cot across from her. Sure, he wasn't hostile, but then again he wasn't really friendly. There was a cold feeling to him. The lack of emotion in his eyes, the neutral blank look on his face, and the calm but ready aura around him.

Emily was the opposite from her partner. Her eyes burned with disdain for having been paired with this stranger. She was scowling and her brows were furrowed in anger. Her muscles were tensed and her agitation hung in the air around her.

Edward was the first to speak. "The squad leader ordered us to work together. It would be best for both of us if we just tried to get along. How would you prefer I be?"

Emily narrowed her gaze, trying to understand what he was asking. When she couldn't come up with a good explanation she'd fallen back on her normal angry threats. "I'd prefer that you be non-existent. I work better alone so leave me alone. Remember that if you piss me off your face is breakable."

"So is every bone in your body." There was something about Edward's words that hinted at a threat but from his appearance it seemed he was just stating fact.

Emily considered her options. She'd seen him in action during their training but there had been nothing really special about his skills. Still there was something about him that made her feel she didn't really know anything about what he could do. She wasn't even sure what to make of his threat. She decided to focus on his question. "What do you mean how would I prefer you be?"

"I mean what sort of person do you want me to be?" Edward's face remained neutral, no hint of meaning. "Do you want me to be an upbeat person?" Like water washing over stone his face changed, a wide grin spreading over his face and a joyful spark appearing in his eyes. "Or would you rather I sulk and brood?" Like a switch the smile was gone, replaced by a slight frown and the joy was gone from his eyes, replaced with a dark thoughtful look. "Do you want me to be chatty or silent? Do you want me to make friends with the other soldiers or stick to just you and me?" His face had gone back to blank and unreadable.

"So you're asking me what sort of person I want as a partner?" Edward nodded and Emily frowned. "I don't want you to be some fake person. I want you to be you."

A look of surprise crossed Edward's face and was gone a second later. "You're all right with me being like this? This is who I am."

"I trust the man sitting across from me more than I could trust some made up personality. I can't trust a fake you, so what I want is you to be you, honest and natural," Emily explained.

Edward nodded, watching her for a moment before speaking. "I'll be whatever you want if it allows us to work together. If honest if what you want, then I will be as honest as possible." Emily nodded and they slipped into silence for a few seconds. "Why did you threaten to break my face? Why not my hand, or neck, or threaten bodily harm to more sensitive parts of me?"

Emily scowled at him and crossed her arms. "If you're looking for me to stroke your ego then forget it. I threatened your face because it annoys me." They stared at each other for several seconds before Emily raised an eyebrow. "Well?" Edward just stared at her. "No joke about stroking or offer for our faces to get more acquainted? Are you sure you're an ODST?"

"Not all ODST make dirty jokes," Edward countered. "Though if it would make you more comfortable with our partnership then I am

willing to make suggestive comments about my desire to do depraved sexual acts with you."

"Do you want to make comments like that?" Emily asked. Edward considered the question and then shook his head. "Then don't. Honest remember?"

Edward nodded and there was a slight hint of something on his face. He was thinking, trying to decide if there was something he should say but he decided against it. "I'm going to go work out." Edward stood up.

Emily stood up as well and he looked at her surprised. "Great, then you can be honest with me and show me your actual skills. I need a work out as well, we can spar." Emily moved toward the door. Edward followed her, not fighting her decision to invade his workout.

27. 027 Winter

027 Winter

Character: Max

Max stared out the front window of his house, watching the snow fall. He waved to his mother, Mary, as she walked toward the family car. She was heading to the grocery store to stock up for the snow that was supposed to hit them over night. Max didn't really know why snow would keep them from eating but his mom said they needed food and he trusted her.

He stood from the window and ran into the kitchen. "Mommy, can I go outside and play? I want to build a snow family." It was something he loved doing and had done as long as he could remember. Not that that was very long. He was only nine.

Max's mother, Laura, looked down from the dishes she was washing. Her long blond hair was pulled back so it didn't get messy while she was washing and a wide smile was spread across her face. "Just let me finish the dishes, sweetheart."

Max grinned and ran through the house, back to the window. He sat, well bounced, and watched the snow fall, eager to get out and play. When his mother came out of the kitchen and moved to the closet. Max moved over to join her and waited until she'd handed him all of his winter gear before moving over to the couch and sitting down to put it on.

Once he'd gotten on all of his gear, with a little help from his mother with his boots, he raced to the door. "Remember to stay in the yard," his mother instructed.

Max stopped at the door. "Yes, mommy." He opened the door and ran out into the snow covered yard. He knew his mother would join him soon, snow family kit in hand. Before she got out though he'd show her how much he'd gotten better at packing snow. He started rolling snow and packing it tight into what were as close to spheres as he could manage.

His mother came up warmly wrapped in a puffy jacket. Max showed her

the ball he was already forming and they got to work. They rolled and packed the snow, making larger and larger balls. They started to stack them into three sets and pack snow around where the balls of snow needed to be connected.

Max's mother was finding some sticks for the arms when max noticed a young girl watching him. She looked to be about five and was watching Max intently. He smiled and walked right over to her. He'd never had much of a problem with walking up to people and making friends.

The little girl seemed unsure what to do but didn't move away. Max could see bits of red hair poking out from under her cap and her green eyes stared straight at him as he neared. Her hands were holding her coat tight around her to try to keep all her warmth in.

"Hi," Max greeted. "I'm Max, who are you?"

The girl frowned for a moment before answering. "My name's Linda." She glanced over at the snowmen. "What are you doing?"

"My mom and me are making a snow family. We do it each year when there's enough snow," Max explained. "Have you ever made one?"

Linda nodded and looked to the trio of snow people. "My mom and I did it each year. We can't do it this year."

"Why not?" Max couldn't understand what would cause a tradition to have to stop.

"My mom isn't around anymore," Linda answered. There was a cold and emotionless tone to her voice that suggested she'd emotionally distanced herself from it.

Max didn't press the matter. He didn't even want to think what could cause a mother to not be around. "Well you can make one with me and my mom. We have plenty of snow."

Linda hesitated but finally nodded. Max took her hand and led her onto his yard. They started rolling up three more large snowballs so they could make a snow child of Linda. When Max's mother returned she was pleased to see her son having made a new friend. She helped them with making the fourth snow person and they set to work decorating then. His mother had to get some items from inside to dress and decorate the fourth snow person as there wasn't enough supplies in their kit.

When they finished Max and Linda stood back to examine their creations. "I think they look good." Max grinned and Linda only nodded.

"All right, who wants hot chocolate?" Max's mother asked.

Max raised his hand. "I'd like some, please." He looked to Linda. "You'll want some. My mom makes the best hot chocolate. She makes it just right with a bit of milk and always puts marshmallows in it."

Linda nodded and turned to Max's mother. "I'd like some, please," she requested quietly.

His mother smiled at the two of them. "Them lets head inside into the warmth and I'll make you both some hot chocolate." She led them inside where they could get warm and let some of the snow melt off their jackets and boots.

The two children sat by the window and sipped hot chocolate until the sun started to drop. When the sun was getting too low and Max's mothers decided it was time for Linda to get back to her family Max made her promise to come back and play with him again. Linda seemed a bit unsure but promised none the less. Max sat in the window and waved at his mother's car as it pulled out of the drive way and moved off down the street.

28. 028 Ignore

028 Ignore

Character: Max

Max walked down the street, the trio of flowers held loosely in his hands. His mother had pruned the flowers for him just for the occasion. He'd never had the same touch with flowers as she had. She could make them bloom in such beautiful bright colors and she always made sure to give him the nicest flowers she could. Today he'd decided to take a pair of lilies and a rose. He liked the way the red popped out against the other flowers.

He'd made this walk many times and knew it by heart. He liked to take this route even though it wasn't the shortest because it was more scenic and avoided the major roads. He liked the quiet and it was safer so his mothers were secure enough in his safety they didn't protest. He turned onto the long winding driveway that led up the series of hills ahead. He liked standing at the foot of the hills at sunset, seeing the stones silhouetted by the setting sun.

He made his way along the driveway, ignoring the people who were already visiting loved ones. He passed many rows in which he knew friends were buried. Many of the friends he had were gone now but he'd always felt lucky to know them, no matter how short the time he'd known them had been. Since his mother had started taking him to the local hospital for charity work when he was just ten Max had always managed to make friends with many terminally ill children. Over time their illnesses won out, but Max tried not to focus on the sorrow of their passing. He chose to focus on the joy of their lives.

Max reached the row that was his destination. He walked past the graves, smiling when he would see freshly places flowers beside tombstones or small mementos left for the dead. He reached the stone that he was looking for and stopped before it.

She had been his first friend to die of a terminal illness. It had happened suddenly, and had taken her so quickly that it was one of the deaths he felt had been unfair. Still he remembered how her father had fallen apart, how he had convinced his mothers to take him to the hospital almost every day to see her. He'd felt good to see the smile she'd give him, even in the final days when things had become difficult for her. The nurses had always told him how much she

looked forward to his visits. When he would visit her he realized how many children there were with illnesses that lucky enough to have visitors. That was what had inspired him to make trips there to make friends with children in need.

Max put the flowers down before the grave and sat down. "Hey, Linda." He smiled at the carved name. "So I've been busy. Don't really have any good news. I got turned down for the last of the scholarships I was hoping for."

Max's smile fell a bit. "I'm going to have to go with my backup plan. My moms are going to freak when I tell them, but I'm going to apply before I tell them what I have planned. If I serve my time the UNSC will pay for me to go to school. It should get me enough education that I can get a job and pay my way through the rest of the years. Maybe I can even become a medical unit for the UNSC. I'd be helping save lives, which is what I want to do."

Max stared down at the flowers and let out a long breath. "Well, I thought you'd want to know." He just sat in silence for a while, staring at the flowers. He knew he should head home, go break the news about the scholarship to his parents and file an application for the UNSC. He didn't want to yet, so here he sat. As soon as he put in his application he'd been saying goodbye to all the plans he had. Still, it was his only way of even getting close to having an education so he'd do it. "I guess I should go. I promise to come see you before I head off to bootcamp, for sure." Max smiled and stood hesitating for a second. "Bye, Linda." He turned and walked down the row of graves to head home.

29. 029 Color

****029 Color****

****Character: Shadow Blade****

Enre kept his gaze on the floor, knowing better than to look up at a time like this. He waited in silence as he watched the feet pace before him. The other elite grumbled something but it was too lost in the growling that accompanied it. Another elite entered the room striding toward Enre and the shipmaster.

"What is the meaning of this? Why have I been called?" Enre looked up for just a second catching a glimpse of the golden armor of the Arbiter before turning his gaze back to the floor.

The shipmaster growled in annoyance. "It is this one. He and his troops have a request that must be approved by you, and would have to be put forward to the humans."

The Arbiter moved over and stood before Enre. "Rise," he commanded. Enre stood and met the Arbiter's gaze. Annoyance, frustration, apprehension, all was clear in the Arbiter's face. "What is your request, Field Marshal?" The title didn't come out as an insult as Enre had expected. Usually people treated it as an insult but from the Arbiter it sounded like a proper title.

"My warriors and I wish to stay behind and assist the humans in defending their world from the Flood." Enre stood tall, knowing that

his request was odd. The surprise and confusion was obvious in the Arbiter's features.

"Why would you abandon your people at a time like this? We are set to go through the portal and stop the prophets. Why chose to stay behind and miss the glory of the fight? The chance to see a new Forerunner structure like none we've ever encountered."

Enre huffed involuntarily at the mention of the Forerunners. "The humans are standing by us as we go through the portal. The only honorable choice is to insure that we do not leave them to fight on their own against the Flood. Besides, Forerunner structures hold little interest for me. They are structures, nothing more. Only bad things come from their things. Long ago the Prophets came from the skies with adapted Forerunner technology, allowing them to enslave our race and blind us. The Flood populates the rings and I expect no better from whatever is on the other side of that portal."

The arbiter paced a bit, considering the words. "It is honorable to want to return an extended hand of assistance to the humans as they offer us one but your forces are too small to do any good here. The humans that stay will die to the Flood and we who go through the portal will stop the Prophets and the Flood. A human construct has promised a solution to the Flood, through the portal. Would that not be a better use of your strength?"

Enre looked away and snapped his two remaining mandibles. "No, it would not."

"Logically it would be, which means there is another reason you wish to stay. I want no lies if you wish my permission to stay," the Arbiter stated. "Now why?"

"Honor, loyalty, and kinship, Arbiter." Enre clenched his fists. "There is a human, and her warriors, who are ordered to stay and fight." He absently reached up and scratched at the scar on his neck. "She and I have history, and they are as siblings to me. In combat we show our true color and she is more Sangheili than many that have dare raise a weapon to her. I will not abandon them to the Flood. There is nothing honorable in abandoning another warrior."

"How dare you speak of a human as our kin, let alone a female as a warrior? You have obviously lost your mind," the shipmaster snapped.

"No, I see more clearly than you who is driven by old ways and seeking revenge," Enre shot back.

The shipmaster took a step forward but the Arbiter stopped them. "Enough!" The word echoed in the room. "Is this human really worth it? Risking your honor and family."

"Yes," he answered without hesitation. "So many will follow the Prophets through the portal driven by their revenge but they do not know what I have learned from this one human. Our history is a back and forward of trying to end one another but the moment we were ordered to work together all that hatred and anger was set aside for a greater purpose. How many of our warriors are set to go through that portal with revenge in their hearts and miss the fact that they can stop the Flood and it should be their focus?" Enre took a step

toward the Arbiter. "Can you say your reasons for leaving are more honorable than mine for staying?"

The Arbiter snapped his mandibles. "This will not go over well with our people. You will be shamed and your family killed. Wife, children, all dead."

"My family is already dead and to not stand by this human, what I believe in, would only shame their memory." Enre had expected to be shamed; he and his warriors were ready for it.

The Arbiter studied him closely, looking for any waver in resolve. "Do you know of the Shadows, Field Marshal?"

Enre nodded, old Sangheili history having been one of his favorite things to learn about. "The Shadows are a group of Sangheili warriors from any Keep that are chosen to deal with the affairs of the Sangheili people and put those concerns above all others, even that of the Prophets. They have not existed since before the Arbiter position became that for only the shamed."

"They were shamed warriors who could only find honor in serving their people," the Arbiter added. "Just as the honor has been returned to the position of Arbiter, so is it time to bring back the Shadows. It should satisfy our people and it would do well to try to stop the Flood from surviving on this side of the portal. Your first task will be to keep any Flood from surviving and making it back to our home."

Enre bowed to the Arbiter. "For my people I will see that it is stopped."

30. 030 Grace

030 Grace

Character: Emily

Emily sat in her chair, toying with the dog tags around her neck. She wasn't really paying attention to the lecture being given by the Captain. She didn't need a lecture on protocol, she knew it all. She understood that this was required but wished that there'd been some form of test she could take so she could skip this class.

So far the Officer academy hadn't lived up to Emily's expectations. Her roommate was an admiral's daughter or something. She hadn't cared quite enough to really listen to the other woman. The one thing she was sure of was the woman was bossy and acted too entitled for Emily's taste. She was considering putting in for a transferred but was fairly sure the first time her roommate crossed her and Emily knocked her out the woman would learn her place.

The Captain ended the lecture and Emily gathered her things. She moved to the door to head to her next class. Once she was out in the hall she looked down to check her schedule. Her things fell to the ground as someone collided with her forcefully. Emily looked toward the person and saw it was an upper class-man. She turned her gaze to the floor and started to pick her things up. She was reaching for her datapad when a foot settled on it. Emily looked up to see the cadet

she'd run into standing before her. She frowned, trying to decide what action to take.

"You newbies never have any respect for your superiors." The upper class men. Moved his foot and caused the datapad to move away from Emily's hand. "On your feet."

Emily did as he instructed, getting to her feet. He towered over her at about six feet four and was clearly more built than her. He struck out, shoving her back. "Maybe I should teach you a lesson." He pulled his fist back and Emily switched to instinct, what hand-to-hand combat training she had took over.

She dodged the first punch, using the element of surprise to duck down and deliver a blow to his kidney causing him to nearly double over before her second fist met with his cheek. He stumbled back but stayed on his feet. Emily could see that he was angry, he charged forward and Emily was hit by his full weight. There was nothing she could do about stopping his weight as he slammed into her. They hit the wall and the man's hand went to her neck and held her against the wall. His fist collided with her head several times before she resorted to a slightly dirty tactic. Her leg struck out between his legs and her foot collided with his nuts. The man released her and grabbed his crotch. Emily didn't hesitate, moving forward and slamming her elbow into the man's nose. He fell to the ground and Emily took a loose fighting stance in case he got back up.

"Enough!" The cadets that had been watching the fight all stood straight and moved out of the way. Emily looked over to see a Lieutenant walking toward them. His hair was buzzed short, mostly gray bit hints of brown indicated his original hair color. The Officer was tall and lean a jagged scar cutting through his hair. Emily snapped to attention. The Lieutenant looked at the upper class men and then to Emily. "Someone take him to the infirmary," he ordered. He then turned his gaze to Emily. "With me,"

Emily followed the Lieutenant to an office down a hallway that she'd never been in. She stood on one side of the desk as the officer sat on the other side in the plush chair.

"Do you need anything for your lip?" The Lieutenant asked as he relaxed in his seat.

Emily's tongue moved over her lip and she felt the split lip she hadn't been aware she'd revived. "No, sir," she answered. She'd gotten worse from fights in high school.

"What is your name, cadet?" The Lieutenant's eyes stared at Emily and made her uneasy.

"Emily Aldura, sir." She remained as still as she could, not sure how much trouble she was probably in.

"Cadet Aldura, are you aware that fighting is strictly prohibited outside of self-defense classes?" It was a trick question, everyone knew it was.

"Yes, sir, Emily answered.

The lieutenant leaned his elbow on his armrest. "You're new here,

only a week in? You haven't been around long enough to have a physical combat training so you must have been trained before you came here." Emily didn't know how to respond so she remained silent. "What are your plans for the future, cadet?"

Emily hesitated, not really sure. "To become an officer, sir." The Lieutenant motioned for her to continue but she didn't know what to tell him. She didn't have plans beyond becoming an officer.

"How about if we try an easier question. What branch of the military?" The Lieutenant leaned forward and settled his elbows on his rest. "Army, navy, or marines?"

"Marine," Emily answered without hesitation.

The Lieutenant considered the answer and then nodded. "Are you sure that this is the path you want to take?" Emily furrowed her brow, not understanding. "You're obviously a promising fighter and would be an asset to infantry. Not to mention that there have been near fights in the past and I can see this becoming a constant problem and will eventually get you kicked out."

"With all due respect, sir, I don't quit and I don't drop out." Emily scowled, annoyed that this man thought he'd get her to quit.

"It's not quitting, simply moving to the correct path. You had a grace and ease to your movements that would make you a fine ground soldier, not to mention you can take a hit. I'm not suggesting that you go out and become a grunt. What you have, the spirit and endurance, you could be an ODST." Emily was surprised by the suggestion. She'd never really given the ODST a thought. She figured they wouldn't want a small woman like her. "What do you say?"

Emily considered the options for a moment. "I think I'll stay here," she decided. Emily could see the disappointment on the Lieutenant's face. "Maybe I will get in more fights and get kicked out, sir, but before I do maybe I'll make a friend, an enemy, or simply convince one future leader to make smart decisions not rash foolish ones that will get good soldiers killed. You want to fill out the transfer paperwork go ahead, just don't date it. If I get kicked out and you still think I'm worthy of trying to be an ODST then. Eat it and send it in, or if you think you're wrong then burn it."

Silence settled in the room and the lieutenant studied her. He sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I'll fill out the paper work. Until then you still need to be punished for your current incident. It was self defense so a week of weapon and armor cleaning should do it." He motioned toward the door. "You're dismissed."

"Yes, sir." Emily turned on her heels and marched out of the office, considering the new path that lay before her. She stopped when someone moved in her way. Emily braced for the person to attack.

The woman had red hair that was recently cut. Her hands were on her hips and she was squarely in Emily's way. "Are you the one that beat up Brent?"

Emily shrugged. "I don't know. I did beat up a guy earlier but I never caught his name." Emily was fairly sure it had been Brent she'd

beaten up as she doubted there were that many fights here.

"Broken nose and a shot to the balls?" The woman asked. Emily nodded, at least now she knew who was probably an enemy. "Yeah, that would be Brent. Nicely done, he needed his ass handed to him. He picks on the younger classes each year and he probably chose you thinking you'd be an easy target. Always enjoy seeing him on the floor crying."

Emily shrugged at the words. "Always happy to put an ass on his ass." Emily relaxed a bit as it was clear this woman wasn't a threat. "Who are you?"

"My name's Sarah Palmer. Who are you?" Palmer asked relaxing and stuck her hand out.

"Emily Aldura," she reached out and took the hand, shaking it.

31. 031 Belong

****031 Belong****

****Character: Tym****

Tym sat at the kitchen table, watching his father. The older man was staring at the tabletop a finger absently tapping on the wood surface. "I never thought you'd do this." His father shook his head.

"Do what? Be my own person and not follow in your footsteps. This is my decision to make. You should be glad that I'm becoming a man and making these choices." Tym had known they wouldn't take it well but he'd had no other choice.

"I thought you were so determined to go to school. What happened to wanting to design buildings?" his father asked.

Here was where Tym had to break the bad news. "I can't go to school any more, we can't afford it. When the government did those recent cuts to the budget the funds for the line of scholarship that I was getting my tuition from was cut off. I know we can't afford it so I'm out of options."

"But the military?" His father seemed unable to understand the choice. "Why not just get a job at a store in town or something?"

"The UNSC has a program that allows me to get money for school. Not to mention I'll be able to send a paycheck home each week. I know things have been tight around here and now I can help."

His father finally looked up and Tym could see the concern in his eyes. "But this is such a dangerous thing to do. You do realize how many soldiers are dying in the fight against the rebels?"

Tym groaned, not happy with being treated like he hadn't thought this through. "I'm aware, dad, but they're doing good work. Protecting people is something they'll train me to do and I promise to try my hardest not to die."

"Why are you promising to try not to die?" Tym and his father looked over to a worried Mal who had just walked into the dining room.

Attention turned to Tym and he knew he was going to have to break the news to his brother. "I joined the UNSC. I'm going to be leaving for bootcamp in a few weeks."

Mal's jaw dropped open. "What? You're leaving? When will you be back?"

Tym shrugged. "I don't know how long training is so I don't know when I'll be back, Mal."

"How can you do this? How can you leave us like this?" Mal had turned angry. "What about the farm?"

"For the thousandth time, Mal, I don't want to be a farmer, it's all yours." Tym sighed at the hurt look on Mal's face. "Listen, Malcolm, sometimes in order to follow your dreams you have to do things you don't plan in order to follow a dream. I want to continue my education but to do that I have to be a soldier first."

Mal turned his gaze to the floor. He didn't look like a nearly teenage boy, rather the small child who had always looked up to Tym. "But I don't want you to go."

"I'm sorry, Mal, but I've already signed up. I've made my choice and I'll be back after my training," Tym assured his brother. "Listen, I don't belong here on this farm. No matter what at some point I was going to have to move away. For now where I belong is in the UNSC, all right. You can still write me and I'll write back."

Mal let out a frustrated huff. "Fine," he agreed reluctantly. "But you better write back."

"I promise," Tym assured him. Mal lifted his hand, spit into it and then stuck it out. Tym sighed and copied the action, shaking his brother's hand. "Spit swear." Mal smiled, content with the deal.

32. 032 Choke

****032 choke****

****Character: James****

James choked on the food in his mouth. He hit his chest a couple times with his fist until the blockage was dislodged. "What did you just say?" he asked as he struggled to regain his breath between coughs.

"I said I want you to run the next demolition on your own. I think you're ready and the guys here trust you. Am I asking too much?" James' father frowned, a slightly concerned look on his face. "I'm not putting too much pressure on you am I? I don't want to push you into something you aren't ready for. I know that you might be very busy with school and such and the stress of senior year."

"No, I want to; I just always figured you'd make me wait longer until I could run a job alone." James was now grinning; thrilled by the amount of trust his father was putting in him. "Which job do you want me to take?"

"We'll which job do you want to take?" his father asked. "You've seen what jobs we have lined up. Which do you think is best?"

James considered the jobs they currently had lined up. "I'd have to say the Abstergo job would be best. It's a large building but has a sort of buffer zone around it so there is room for slight fault if it does happen," he reasoned.

"Very good, that is a good first job for an amateur. So you'll be on the Aperture job. You'll have Ted's crew at your disposal." He started to go through the files on his computer and transfer them over to a datapad.

"Wait," James stopped him. "You said Aperture, not Abstergo. You meant Abstergo, right?" James hoped his father had just miss-spoke. The Aperture job was a much more complex job and was a big deal for the company.

"No, I meant Aperture," his father confirmed. "Abstergo is for an amateur, which you are not. You can handle the Aperture job without any trouble."

"But the Aperture Labs wants a building only feet from another building taken down and a area twice as large built. I don't know how to do that. Not to me toon it's downtown which means a lot more safety risk. The Abstergo job is in the industrial part of town, much safer."

"You don't know the building part but you know how to take down a building that is next to another one. Jacob will be assisting with the build but the demolition is all yours." He handed the datapad across the table. "That's all the information you'll need for the job. Any last questions?"

"Just one," James said as he took the datapad. "Are you nuts? Yeah I know how to do this stuff but this is a big job to give me for my first time."

"I have absolute confidence in you James. You have a skill for this and I think the Abstergo job just wouldn't test you well enough. I know you can handle this." His father returned to his lunch, biting into his sub.

"But Aperture is a big source of income for us. I'd prefer if I weren't putting a major contract source in danger. I appreciate the trust, dad, I really do, but I don't know if I trust me," James explained.

"Son, you have a skill for knocking buildings down that is rare, a gift. I basically let you run the last job just buffered between you and the crew so you wouldn't realize. The crew respects your work ethic, your skill, and will listen to you even though to a lot of them you're still just a kid. That's saying a lot. I worked with some of these guys for a decade before they would stop questioning me." His father leaned back in his plush leather chair. "Have a little

more faith in yourself."

"The only thing I have faith in is physics," James muttered.

"Then have faith that physics will help you complete the job. As your boss I'm giving you the Aperture job. You don't argue with the boss, particularly when he's giving you a big chance like this." His father tapped his desk. "Now eat your lunch."

"Can I argue with my father?" James asked. His father shook his head and James sighed. "Yes, sir." He grabbed his sandwich and started to look through the information on the Aperture building and planning out how best to bring it down.

33. 033 Reach

****033 Reach****

****Character: Patrick****

Patrick stared at the circuit board on the desk in front of him. "I don't know, it seems like you might be reaching a bit too high." Patrick frowned at his friend, Trevor, who was sitting beside him. "Oh, don't look at me like that, Pat."

"If you don't want me mad at you don't question my dreams. I am completely capable of doing it, it's just I need a few classes in order to figure out how to finish it." Patrick placed his soldering iron down. "I can't believe you'd doubt me."

"Hey, you're great with stuff like electronics but AI are completely different. They're a completely different level of difficulty." Trevor sighed and put up his hands. "All I'm saying is programs and stuff are harder than circuit boards."

Patrick rolled his eyes. "I'm aware of that. I've been reading up on AIs and I understand the base programs and the creation of them. What I need are some programming classes to get it all to work," he explained.

"Yeah but where are you going to get the money for it? You don't really have the money for classes like that," Trevor pointed out. "I know you make good money from repairing things but it's not enough to be able to go to school."

Patrick tapped his finger against the desk for a couple seconds. "About that, I think I've found a way to get money for it."

"And what brilliant idea do you have?" Trevor asked. "You going to rob a bank with a virus?"

Patrick shook his head. "Actually I plan on joining the UNSC." Patrick could see the look of surprise on Trevor's face. "What?"

"You're going to join the UNSC? Please tell me that you're not going to join ONI. You know the kind of stuff they're said to do."

"I'm not joining ONI," Patrick assured his friend. "I don't want to

be doing morally questionable stuff. Besides, when I'm done with my service I want to leave, go to school, not be stuck in the service like a ONI operative."

Trevor relaxed a bit. "Well then I wish you the best of luck. I don't know how well you'll do in bootcamp but I'm sure you'll be able to manage it. Though are you sure there's no other way?"

"There's no other option. Studying AI is expensive and I don't qualify for enough scholarships. When I graduate I'm going to have to join the military or give up on my dream." Patrick stared at the circuit board. "I don't like not having a choice."

"Sometimes you don't have a choice and being smart can't help you," Trevor said. "Most people have to give up on their dreams. You've found a way to avoid that, so at least you have that."

"You're really not making it better," Patrick pointed out.

"Hey, I'm not the smart one here. I'm just the streetwise friend of the nerd that teaches you pop culture phrases so you don't look like a fool." Trevor grinned, satisfied with himself.

"Yeah, you're kind of making it obvious which of us is the smart guy," Patrick teased.

"Watch it. I'm not great at verbal comebacks so I'd have to break your board," Trevor warned.

"Oh, so now you've turned into a schoolyard bully? Threatening to break the geek's stuff." Patrick grinned. He knew Trevor wouldn't actually do it. "Remind me why we're friends."

"Because I'm awesome," Trevor countered. The two teens laughed and Patrick returned to his soldering.

34. 034 Difficult

****034 difficult****

****Character:Tobias****

Tobias watched his opponent carefully, looking for any opening that he might be able to exploit. His opponent suddenly moved forward and Tobias shifted his attention to defense. He blocked punches and kicks but couldn't turn the tide. He didn't see the blow coming, just felt it and the floor as he hit the mat.

"What's wrong with you, Tobias? You usually counter that move." The older man moved over and held his hand out.

Tobias took the hand and let the other man help him up. "Sorry, Sensei. I'm a bit distracted." Tobias moved over to the edge of the mat and sat down. He grabbed his water bottle and settled in.

"You are usually so focused. What's wrong?" Tobias' Sensei sat down beside him. "If we cannot clear our minds then all choices are being made in that fog. We must keep our minds clear. What has you distracted?"

Tobias hesitated for a moment before speaking. "This week is the anniversary of a bad event in my life." His Sensei motioned for him to continue. "A little while before I came to train and work here I lost the most important person in my life."

"You did seem troubled when you came here. Part of the reason I accepted you was you seemed to need the discipline. What happened?" To Tobias his Sensei had always been like a second father to Tobias. He was someone that Tobias felt he could be truly be honest with.

"I was on a date with my girlfriend, walking home from the movies. We were only fifteen so we had to walk. We were just walking down the street when this guy came out of an alley. I used to get in a lot of fights so when he pulled a knife and tried to mug us I wasn't afraid. The thing was I didn't really know how to fight. Back then I always lost. You remember that scar on my side, he stabbed me. He stabbed her as well but he missed most of my major organs but he didn't on her. I woke up in the hospital room and she was gone. She's part of the reason I wanted to learn to fight. If I'd been able to do something maybe I could have stopped him, saved her." Tobias hung his head. "I don't want to be weak."

"You are not weak," his Sensei asserted. "You didn't lie down in your sorrow and give up. The most difficult part of losing someone is continuing on without them. You have become much stronger since then and I believe that you survived for a reason." Tobias frowned at him, not liking the insinuation that Natalie had died because she didn't have a reason to survive. "What I mean is that I believe you survived because you have another purpose in this world. There is something that you still need to do. What that is I do not know, but I believe you have something yet to come."

Tobias sighed, not sure if he believed the same thing. "Maybe, but I have no idea what it could possibly be that I'm meant to do." Tobias pulled his knees up to his chest. "Does that mean Natalie didn't have a purpose, a reason to survive?"

"Not for certain. It might be that what you're meant to do is important enough that death would be too soon. People always think that a knife missing their organs is luck, but it is what is meant to be. Not all fairs are set, but yours is."

Tobias just groaned. He had no idea if he believed it but at the moment it was hard to believe there was some greater purpose for him or there hadn't been one for Natalie.

His Sensei stood and Tobias looked up to him. "Think of this, Tobias. Would you have come here if she didn't die?" He moved away and Tobias was left stunned. He wasn't sure if it was more the insinuation that she had died to push him down a path or that he was right, Tobias wouldn't have come to the dojo if not for having lost Natalie.

35. 035 Heat

035 Heat

Character: Emily

Emily sat down in the grass, taking a long drink of water from her canteen. She stared up at the sun in the cloudless sky. She wished the heat wave that was currently assaulting the academy would end soon before they all baked alive. Emily watched one of the other cadets fall to the ground, exhausted, beside the track near by. She shook her head, fairly sure that they wouldn't last much longer in the physical exercise. They would either drop out or try to find a way around the requirement.

Emily looked to her side as Sarah sat down, slumping down onto the ground. Emily was as close to friends with the woman as she'd been with anyone in her entire life. Not that that was saying much. They sat in silence, avoiding conversation as always, just knowing that being near someone else repetitively at least gave the illusion of being social. The two had never been big on talking, Sarah had never backed Emily up in a fight, and they never helped each other with school work. Still, they were what Emily considered friends.

"You know they're going to find out what you did," Sarah spoke up. "They'll find out it was you that did that to Kingston and they'll toss you out."

"Let them," Emily grumbled. She'd stop caring long ago about what would happen to her. She wasn't willing to suffer the insults of the stuck up fools that were learning here. They were all arrogant jerks that didn't seem to understand what was at stake. "I'm getting tired of this place all ready."

"You haven't even been here a year," Sarah pointed out. Emily could tell she was surprised. "Are you really giving up like that?"

"I'm not giving up," Emily countered. "Giving up would be leaving. I'm staying until they kick me out. I signed up for this but I'm not going to fall into line and be the obedient little mindless sheep they want me to be. I'm not going to stand around and let fools who don't take the responsibility they are training for seriously pretend they know more about duty than me."

Sarah frowned but didn't say anything. She'd heard Emily complain about how the students neglected to understand their responsibility before. "So for how long has your plan been to injure people until they throw you out of the academy?"

"It was never the plan. I don't think being an officer was ever right for me but the fights are just natural for me. Every time they say something that dismisses the people that suffer because of their choices or show how stupid they are my first reaction is to knock them out. It's not a plan."

"If you don't think that being an officer is right for you then why did you come here in the first place?" Sarah asked. "If not an officer then what?"

"I had to come here, I wanted to prove that if I wanted to I could try to be an officer. If it fit better for me then I would try to stay, but I don't feel like it fits," Emily explained. "From here I'll either become a normal marine or an ODST, not sure yet."

Sarah frowned, apparently not understanding but letting it go. She looked across the field and sighed. "Here they come. Told you they'd

find out."

Emily looked across the field to where a couple of the MPs that guarded the academy grounds were talking to their drill instructor. "Well, looks like I'm getting out of today's run."

The MPs moved toward them and Emily watched them carefully. "Are you Emily Aldura?" one of them asked.

"That would be me," Emily said standing up. "What do you want with me?" She knew why they were there, but there was no point in admitting guilt if you didn't know what they were going to accuse you of.

"You're to come with us, Cadet." They didn't give any further explanation. Emily just nodded and followed them as they lead the way toward the main offices. Emily glanced back only once at Sarah sitting in the grass. She just sat there and watched Emily walk away. Sure, she didn't expect Sarah to come to her aid or come to her defense, but there was nothing. She just sat there and watched as they led her away to whatever her future might be. Emily turned her attention back to where she was walking and on whatever was waiting for her in the offices.

36. 036 Veneer

****036 Veneer****

****Character: Luke****

Luke scrolled through the selections of videos, trying to decide which one to download. It was all part of the show he had to put on. The kids at school might know the truth about him and so might his support group but his family was still in the dark and he wasn't ready for them to know the truth. To keep them off his trail he was putting on a veneer of being straight.

He had made his tablet's wallpaper a female swimsuit model and had chosen a half-naked picture of a celebrity for the background of his phone. He had hidden away all his actual porn and was now trying to create a file on his system with heterosexual porn as a final touch. Luke hated having to hide; his support group had made him so much more comfortable with himself. Still he feared how his family would react if they found out the truth about him.

Luke clicked on one of the videos and checked to be sure that his tablet was muted. He sped through the video until the man showed up. He scowled, not finding the man as very attractive so he went back to the selection. No one would really notice that he was choosing based on the man, his parents would just be glad a woman was involved.

Luke furrowed his brow as a chat request opened up. He closed out the site and opened the chat. He recognized the man as Ralph, another member of his support group. "Hey Ralph."

Ralph seemed uneasy, his hand running over his orange hair. "Hey, Luke, having a pretty bad day." By the way he said it Luke knew what he meant.

Luke moved over to his door quickly and locked the door before sitting down on his bed. "Tell me what happened, Ralph." An important part of their support group was being there to support each other. They didn't have people in their homes that could turn to so they had to be able to trust each other.

Ralph hesitated, looking away from the screen for a couple seconds before he started. "I was down town, getting some new clothing at Sercy. I was looking at shirts when these guys from my school, the ones I've been talking about in group, came up to me. They started to pick on me, call me names and push me. I had no idea what to do. I sort of panicked and did nothing. I didn't even walk away, just stood there and let them assault me."

"Ralph, what they did was wrong. Sure you could have walked away but they likely would have just followed you until you were chased from the store. Standing your ground is better; it shows that you can't be chased away. You need to learn to ignore them, let it run off like a river over stone."

Ralph sighed and shook his head. "I just don't do that well, Luke." Ralph fidgeted a bit. "I just don't know how to ignore people or the things they say."

Luke considered the situation and wished that Tyler was on. He was better at this kind of thing. "You know how I handle people that get under my skin, I hit them. If you want I can offer to come with you next time, pretend to be your boyfriend, and knock them out cold to teach them a lesson."

"Tyler says we should try not to use violence," Ralph countered. "I don't want to have to use violence, that's what they're doing, though I do appreciate the offer."

"Yeah, I know most of you prefer the nonviolent options, they just come easier to me. Listen, I'm not really good at this, Ralph, but if there's a way I can be a help I'll help."

"Thanks, Luke, it means a lot." Ralph smiled slightly. "Well, I'll let you get back to whatever it is that you were doing."

"Yeah, I'll talk to you later," Luke said, closing out the chat window. He looked at the file of videos he'd gathered and sighed. He deleted the file, suddenly feeling ashamed. Here he was telling Ralph to stand up to those that hated who they were but at the same time he was trying to hide it himself. He tossed the tablet to the side and crossed his arms to sulk in his frustration.

37. 037 Fall

****Prompt: 037 Fall****

****Character: Emily****

The trees rustled as the chilly autumn wind rushed through the city. Emily pulled her jacket tighter around herself and stared up at the multicolor leaves. She always loved this time of the year, and thought the trees were always so pretty. It was a kind of natural

beauty that was never captured right in pictures or paintings. The kind of beauty that could only be truly understood in person.

Emily loved to immerse herself in the sea of colors, which was why she'd climbed this tree. The young woman had settled into a crook in the branches and was just enjoying the calm. When she'd been a kid, Jason had always told her not to climb trees. He always said that one day she'd fall and break her neck, but she had yet to lose her footing. Jason had just been a worry wart and never wanted her to do anything dangerous. She'd always felt it was hypocritical that he would tell her not to climb trees, while he had owned a motorcycle. It almost seemed ironic that he'd spent all his time worrying about her safety, and he was the one who had died.

Her music stopped and she pulled her music player from her jacket pocket. Emily searched through her list of albums before finding one that seemed ideal and fit what she felt like listening to at the moment. She hit shuffle and slipped her music player back into her pocket. Heavy drums and fast guitar pounded in her ear and Emily closed her eyes. She had to be careful or she might fall asleep, and she could fall out of her place if she did. She thought of trips to the park with her brother and her father on one of the rare occasions he'd had time off. She missed those days, and her family. Her grandmother was a good person, but she had never been the very attentive and she seemed to have no real interest in raising a granddaughter. But Emily didn't care; she only needed her grandmother to provide shelter, and as soon as she was old enough she'd be out of the woman's hair.

Emily opened her eyes and stared out at the sky. The sun was going down and she decided that she better leave her perch. Emily slid from her spot and slowly started to climb down the tree. She had gotten almost all the way down, when a branch suddenly snapped under her foot. Her hands slipped and the bark in her other hand tore free from the tree. She felt weightless as she fell, and at the same time helpless. The falling feeling was both thrilling and terrifying all at once. It would have been exciting if she wasn't worried about the ground below.

She never hit the ground, instead hitting something soft and warm. Her savior groaned as he hit the ground with her weight on top of him. Emily looked over to the man who had broken her fall before quickly getting off of him. "I'm so sorry!" she said, scrambling to her feet. She was embarrassed for falling, and for needing to be saved.

The man stood up and rubbed at his back. "No problem. I'm just glad I was fast enough. Are you hurt at all? That was a long way down." He smiled, but there was something about it that seemed off to Emily.

"I'm fine; I just hope you didn't get hurt. I should have been more careful." Emily looked away from him and toward the ground. "Oh, thank you."

The man shrugged. "It was just luck. I had just been running past when I saw you fall. Guess fate didn't want you to die today." She could hear the smile on his voice but for some reason it still sounded a bit forced. Maybe she was just paranoid and suspicious of strangers, but he had saved her.

"So what's your-" Emily stopped as she looked up and found that he was gone. She looked around but found no sign of the man. Emily frowned, wondering if she had just imagined him; but if that were true then she couldn't explain how she was unhurt by the fall. She sighed and realized that her music had stopped again. She pulled out her music player and cursed when she saw the cracked screen. Great, how was she going to explain that to her grandmother? She stuffed the device into her pocket and set off for home.

38. 038 Nightmare

****Prompt: 038 Nightmare****

****Character: Emily/Edward****

Fingers gently touched Edward's shoulder. His hand quickly gripped the knife he'd hidden and he brought it up to the person's neck. He stopped as soon as he recognized Emily's blue eyes. He pulled the blade away and looked down to the blood that dripped from a small cut he'd made. Emily moved away and toward the exit without a word. Edward got up and followed her out. They walked in silence until Emily led them to an empty commons area. She sat down at a table and Edward sat down across from her.

Silence settled in the room, Edward watching Emily and the woman staring down at the table. Edward wouldn't speak until Emily did, as she'd been the one to bring them here. His hand reached out, finger gently running over the small cut. "You should have more control," Emily said. Edward frowned at her but his finger remained touching her neck. "I would think by now you wouldn't have to look at me to recognize me."

"I would, if I wasn't asleep," Edward defended. "I'll stop sooner next time." He dropped his hand and just watched her, waiting for more. The silence wasn't uncomfortable for the two of them, they could sit in silence just fine for hours, but this was different. It was the middle of the night, they had training tomorrow, and Emily had woken Edward and taken him all the way to the commons area.

It was a few minutes before Emily spoke again. "I had a nightmare." Edward didn't say anything, just waited for more information. "Have you ever had a family?"

"People don't just appear out of thin air. There has to be a genetic origin," Edward answered. "And contrary to what the others might say, I am not the grim reaper in a mortal form."

"Parents aren't the same as family," Emily argued. "Family cares about you, loves you. Parents aren't obligated to love you." Emily shook her head. "It doesn't matter. I had a nightmare about my family." Edward listened in silence, watching her closely. "They were all there and I kept trying to go to themâ€|but they'd vanish. I could hear their voices, telling me that it wasn't fair I had survived. I shouted at them to stop, but they only seemed to talk louder until it was so loud." She looked down to her hand. Edward looked over as well and furrowed brow, confused by his own hand resting on hers. "Thank you."

Edward looked to his partner. His hand gently gripped hers. "It was just a dream," he assured her.

Emily shook her head. "Not for that," she said, shifting her hand to indicate his hand. "You were in my dream. When the noise was getting overwhelming you covered my ears and blocked it all out." Emily smiled slightly. "Thank you for stopping the noise."

Edward was quiet for a moment. "We're partners. Any time you need help, I'll be there." He looked back to his hand, watching it as though expecting it to move again without his instructions.

"I suppose we are. Our squad leader does always say we should be able to absolutely trust our partner." They just sat quietly for a moment, taking comfort in the silence. "Do you ever have nightmares, Edward?" Emily asked.

Edward still just watched his hand like a guard watching a prisoner. "I don't dream much," he finally answered. "What happened after I stopped the sound? Did the dream just end?"

Emily shook her head. "No, my family appeared again, like zombies. They moved to attack me, but you didn't leave." She stopped and looked away from him. "That was all."

Edward turned his gaze upward. His free hand moved up and guided her face so she was looking at him. "I don't like being lied to," he said quietly. He leaned in a bit closer to her. "What else happened?" Emily frowned, defiant, trying to stand her ground. Edward leaned in to only inches away from her. "Tell me."

"You want to know what happened?" she asked, relaxing a bit. Edward slowly nodded but said nothing. Emily suddenly leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. It took a fraction of a second for Edward to respond, opening his mouth to allow the kiss to deepen. They clung to each other as they competed for dominance. When they broke apart the two stared at each other, taking deep breaths. Emily suddenly stood up, and before Edward could react, she was gone.

39. 039 Contagious

****039 contagious****

****Character: Matthew****

Matthew always found it odd how contagious an idea could be. He sat in his couch watching the news. They were covering a rebel attack in one of the outer colonies. It was just another planet that was falling to the selfish ideals of the rebels. What annoyed Matthew the most was their complete disregard for innocent lives. In the attack they were describing on the news, two hundred people had been killed and fifty had been seriously injured.

Matthew felt sickened by it. These rebels claimed to be fighting for the people, but instead they were killing them. It didn't make sense, and it made him suspicious of their motives. What sort of group that wanted to protect the people would also kill them? The flat tone of the newscaster made it clear that he'd reported on this sort of tragedy too many times. When Matthew thought about it, these sort of

reports were becoming more and more common, as we're the reports of the UNSC's counter measures.

Matthew switched off the news and grabbed his things. He didn't bother announcing he was leaving. His mother was at work, and his father was asleep after a long night shift. Matthew made sure to lock the door as he moved out of the house. He enjoyed his daily walk to work, and today was a particularly nice day. The sky was clear, the air fresh, and it was just warm enough to be comfortable.

The store was only a few minutes away, and when Matthew arrived he found his boss forcefully telling a man to leave. Matthew moved into the back of the shop and changed into his uniform in the bathroom. When he came back out the man was gone, and his boss was standing at the main counter.

"What was that about?" Matthew asked as he grabbed his work bag and checked his gear to be sure it was all there. He didn't want to get to a job and find out he was missing something.

"That guy wanted to put a poster up in our window." His boss shook his head. "I will not take part in such things. It's bad for business, and I won't have the blood of innocents on my hands." Matthew raised an eyebrow, not understanding.

His boss slid a poster over to him and Matthew read the information. "This sounds like a rebel rally." Matthew didn't like it. Sure there were a few problems with their government, but not enough that it should fall prey to rebels.

"I know that's exactly what this is. These rallies, they think they speak for the people but they aren't open discussions, they are a small group taking advantage of the anger of people to make them follow like sheep. In the end the government won't fall to their attacks; we'll just have a load of dead civilians and UNSC troops all over the place." His boss continued to mumble about it for a while.

"I hope that no one shows up, or if they do it's to stop these people. From the looks of it the UNSC already had its hands full." Matthew moved over to the work schedule and checked what jobs they had lined up.

"That's because the UNSC is under-manned. Not enough young men and women realize that they are the only things that can protect civilians. Instead they are swayed by clever talking rebels that convince them of a lie just because their leader wants power. Then they're bombing civilian locations, destroying families, and tearing sons from their fathers!" Matthew set a hand on his boss' shoulder and the man seemed to come back to his senses. "I'm sorry, Matthew, I got carried away." He moved over to a chair and sat down.

"You have personal experience with the effects of rebel attacks," Matthew guessed. "You know I've heard you talk about your son but never how he died."

"It's not an easy tale to tell," his boss admitted. "He was studying on Biko, learning about the culture and studying to become a geologist. He was just having lunch with a few fellow scientists when a bomb went off. There wasn't even enough left of him to send back to

me. Just like that, they removed my son from this world." He shook his head and stared down at the floor. "Promise me you'll never become one of them, Matthew. You're a good man, and we need men like you to stay loyal to our government, be an example for the kids, not these anarchy creating rebels."

"Of course I won't become one of them," Matthew assured him. "I know that we have to stay loyal, that our economy relies on trade with Earth's other colonies. I'd never harm civilians."

"Good, good," his boss muttered and patted Matthew on the arm. He moved into the back of the shop and Matthew watched him go.

Matthew frowned, looking down to the list of jobs but he wasn't really reading it. He'd never seen his boss like that. The passion behind his hatred for rebels and the sorrow of the loss of his son were so out of place for the cheerful man he knew. He had seen the reports on the news, but he'd never seen that side of it before - the human side. He considered what his boss had said. Was the UNSC really under-manned? Was that the reason why the rebels hadn't been stopped? He looked to the poster again and grabbed it, tucking it away. He checked the work schedule again and found the next job lined up for him. He grabbed his tools and headed out the door and toward the first house.

40. 040 Good Riddance

****040 Good Riddance****

****Character: David****

David looked down at the bodies on the ground. He had to work to keep his lunch down, not wanting to lose face. This was his murder case and he wanted to show he could handle it. The man was lying on the ground, his pail skin the only real outward sign that he was dead. Other than that he looked so normal.

A coroner was leaning over the body, examining a wound. "Gunshot wound, but I don't think that's what killed him." The woman looked up to David and the officer that he was partnered with. "There are marks of a blade so I think the guy shot the wounds with a gun to try to hide them."

"Got a gun," another officer spoke up. David's partner put on a glove and took the weapon.

He looked over the gun and nodded. "As I expected, it's the victim's gun." He sighed and passed it back to the officer to put into a bag. "Probably wiped down as well." He then turned to David. "All right, Hutch, what do you think happened?"

David ignored the nickname and thought. "Motive isn't clear yet but likely he was stabbed, the perp took the gun off him, shot the wounds, cleaned the gun, and took the knife before fleeing." David paused for a moment. "How did you know it was his gun?"

"Spend a bit of time on these streets and you get to know the local sum community. This guy had been searched a few times, always found that gun on him." David's partner looked down at the man. "There are

people who will die that will cause you to feel sad, but guys like this at not those kind. Good riddance to bad scum." He scowled and looked to David. "Likely his killer is someone who's life he ruined. This guy was a drug dealer, arms seller, and a part time pimp. He'd get women hooked on drugs and then have them work for him, get good honest kids hooked on drugs early, and probably was a source of the weapons that cause a quarter of the violent activity on this street. There's a long list of people who might want him dead. A prostitute that was tired of owing him money, a druggie wanting a high, victim of violence, or even a family member of someone who was hurt by the things he did."

"So then how do we narrow down that list?" David asked. "Is there any way of telling which possible motive to start with or at least narrow down the possibilities?"

David's partner moved away from the body, back toward their patrol car, and motioned for David to follow. Once they were a distance away he answered. "Listen, there isn't any way we can narrow it down. No evidence is going to give us a clear reason why a man like that died. Besides, we'd be wasting time that would be better spent on solving crimes where good people die, the innocent."

"So we're just going to let whoever did this get away? We're supposed to uphold the law and you want to ignore it." The idea of not doing their job fully was odd to David. "I mean, I'm not exactly complaining. There would be so much work to do and so many people to talk to. It would take us weeks, probably over time, to even come up with a suspect."

"If whoever did this is actually a danger than we'll catch then when they kill someone who'd death isn't a favor to the community. It's not like we don't have enough work do to as it is." David's partner moved to the driver's side and opened the door. "Come on, they'll have everything back at the office for us. I'm sure there's some robbery somewhere that we can respond to." He got into the car and David joined him.

David wasn't sure how he felt about just letting someone get away with killing someone. He knew they should have been looking for the killer but at the same time he didn't think that the man was worthy of their energy. He just sat back in the car, knowing that there was nothing he could do about it. Maybe this was just how the experienced people did things and he just needed to roll with it. David turned his gaze to the streets as the car started to move, looking for any signs of trouble.

41. 041 Goodbye

041 Goodbye

Character: Shadow Blade

It was not often that Enre received messages from home, particularly not from Ahwu. He would sometimes get word of new children born, or notice of the death of kin but never a direct message from his wife. He was understandably thrilled to have even as much contact as a message with her provided after so long away. He went to a more private space, wanting to at least feel like it was just him and

Ahwu.

He hit play on the message but it was not what he expected. Ahwu's features were sorrowful and she hesitated to speak. "My dear husband, I have bad tidings." She wouldn't look at the screen. "They found out what happened, I don't know how but they found out."

Enre felt a cold weight in his stomach. He knew right away what she was referring to. They'd tried so hard to hide it but somehow someone had found out. Enre took a step closer toward the screen, hand reaching up to touch the surface.

Ahwu finally looked up and Enre could see the sorrow in her eyes. "Our Kiadon already decided on a punishment. Luckily Hast was able to get me the time to record this." She took a deep breath before she continued. "Enre, I want you to know it has been an honor to be your wife. You are by far the most intelligent Sangheili there is, and I have been so happy to help pass on that intelligence to the next generation, or at least what is left of what I was able to give you." She reached out and placed her hand on the screen. Enre moved his over it but felt his heart fall as he didn't feel her warmth and was brought back to the reality that she was so far away. "By the time you get this message I will already be gone. I convinced them you had no idea what had happened so they have decided not to extend my sentence to our children or you."

As she spoke Enre could feel the strength in his body ebbing away with each word. He leaned against the terminal, finding it harder to stand on his own. Ahwu was not just a wife to him, she was his driving force. She was what pushed him forward but that was gone and he felt like all the air had left his lungs.

"I want you to know that I was happy as your wife, as happy as I could be without being able to fight. I did not choose to become your wife simply to bare superior children, but because you treated me as no other did, with respect. You made me feel happy to just be around you, to see you succeed. I am very proud of you, our children are strong, and you will carry on." Ahwu looked down for a moment and then back up. "Goodbye, Enre. Live on, find another sensible female, marry her, and give our people a better future." The video cut off and Enre was left staring at nothing.

Enre's legs gave out under him and he fell to his knees. His hands went to the wall in some sort of effort to stay upright and not just collapse to the ground. He was having trouble grasping the reality of it all. Ahwu, his beloved wife was gone, and there was nothing he could do. As the weight began to settle his breathing became labored, like his lungs just couldn't take in enough air. He finally took in enough breath and as he let it out it came out as a scream, a roar of pain and sorrow for what was now gone. His fist slammed into the terminal, denting the metal and causing the controls to vanish.

This was all because of those fools in his Keep, the ones he had set out to replace. Their strict following of out dated tradition had cost him the love of his life. She had urged him to find another but the very idea seemed impossible. How could he take another after her? There was no female Sangheili as intelligent, sensible, or determined as her. How could any other ever compare?

Enre stood in the center of the room and looked around. He had

toppled a chair, dented a desk, and left marks on the walls. His blood was smeared over surfaces and he realized that his hands were bleeding. He picked up the chair and sat down, taking some time to collect himself. He felt unsure of what to do next. He decided he'd spent too much time in the small room and left, heading to the barracks.

42. 042 Scarred

****042 scarred****

****Character: ODSS****

The rain beat down on the base, having fallen steadily since the day before. The fields surrounding the area had turned into a muddy mess, which was the only thing that was holding back the Covenant. They had stopped attacking after the mud had slowed them down enough to the point where the marines had only to fire forward and they'd be cut down. Silence had fallen over the area, giving the soldiers a moment of peace.

Peter sat at the edge of the protective sandbags, watching the forest in the distance for any sign of enemies. The rest of the team sat on the soggy ground, weapons under blankets to try to keep them clean and free of jamming. The mud may have deterred the Covenant, but they were persistent and it would only be a matter of time before they returned. And when they did they would likely have more vehicles, and maybe some stationary guns.

"You are a moron," Tobias grumbled. "Who doesn't know an overcharged plasma pistol when they see it? It's a ball of glowing green light. How do you miss that?"

"You miss it when you're trying to stab a Jackal in the face," Tym countered, checking over the armor on his forearm. The metal was burnt a bit from the plasma. "Sorry I was showing you how it's properly done."

"Properly done? Wow, you really are an idiot." Tobias shook his head. "If you'd done it properly you would have been able to pull the blade from the Jackal, avoided the shot, and stabbed the Grunt."

"Why not just shoot both of them," Matthew spoke up. "If you were in a position to kill a Jackal with a knife then you could kill it with a pistol, and could have easily killed the Grunt. Why make it complicated?"

"Have you not figured that out?" James cut in. "They look to make it more difficult. They always go for assassinations rather than just shooting an enemy." He slid the last bullet of a round into a magazine. They were salvaging whatever ammunition they could to avoid having to talk to the scientist inside the base again.

"That's just stupid. You should be making things easier, like by running them over," Luke reasoned. "It's still a challenge to hit them, but less dangerous than using a knife."

"Unless there's an overcharged plasma pistol and a group of Grunts ready to throw grenades," Max interjected. "Then you become a ball of

fire and it becomes more dangerous than using a knife."

"Obviously I need to teach you more stealth techniques. If it had been me, I would have killed the Grunt first which would have left the Jackal free to kill without threat." David checked a hole in his suit that was a bit bloody, looking for a wound.

"Yeah, well I didn't see the Grunt," Tym snapped. "It was only near me because it was running from Ms. Elite-targeter." He motioned toward Emily.

"Someone had to focus on the real threat," Emily snarled, flinching a bit as Edward continued to stitch up a wound. "If you kill the Elites the Grunts go running, leaving only the Jackals as a threat. You need to work from the top down."

"Unless there's a hunter, then you kill that first." Edward was leaning a bit over the wound to try to give himself some shelter from the rain to work. "Though are we talking about the hierarchy of command, or strength?"

"I'm talking about threat-level," Emily answered. "Hunters are the highest threat, Elites, Drones, Jackals, and then Grunts. That's just logic."

"Actually, logically speaking the ships are the highest threat," Patrick interjected. "Though I honestly think that the Engineers are the bigger threat. Those things are a pain in the ass."

"They aren't that hard to kill." Peter didn't look up from his scope. "A head-shot kills them like everything else."

"You can also use an overcharged plasma pistol to overload them and kill them. You can't tell me that they are more of a threat than an Elite with one of those swords." Luke spoke up and Patrick scowled at his teammate. "I mean you can break through Jackal's shields, Hunters are slow and easy to avoid, but Elites are fast and smart. And with those light swords they're deadly. How many of us have been scarred by an attack from an Elite? Now how many have been attacked by an Engineer or have been scarred by a Hunter?"

"Hey, Hunters can be dangerous," James spoke up. The soldiers laughed at the unspoken joke. "Not to mention those shields can hurt."

"Tell me about it," Tobias grumbled. "Stupid Elite."

"Honestly aren't Wraiths the worst thing to have to face? Vehicles are much more annoying," David argued. "Always have to keep your eyes and ears out for the damn things."

"They aren't that hard. Just overcharge them and steal the damn things." Luke patted the plasma pistol he had on his hip. He often had one to be sure that he could EMP any enemy.

"Revenant," Peter spoke up from his look out position.

"Well they are the hell-spawn of a Ghost and a Wraith," Luke admitted. "Though I wouldn't call them the most dangerous enemy."

"No you idiot, I mean Revenant inbound, several of them." Peter moved down from his spot. "I think at least two Wraiths and some Ghosts. Seems they realized the mud can't slow you down if you hover over it."

"I call keeping one of the Wraiths," Luke stated, grinning before he polarized his visor.

Tym and Tobias looked to each other and nodded. "Luke, Peter, you take one Wraith. Emily, Edward, take the other." The two pairs nodded.

"Everyone else pick your poison, steal it, and when we've killed everything we don't own we'll see if you can do doughnuts with anti-gravity vehicles." The ODSS all nodded. "All right, marines, lets kick some Covie ass!"

43. 043 Last Dance

****043 last dance****

****Character: Tobias****

Tobias carefully moved around the mat, watching his opponent. He gripped the handle of his wooden sword tight, looking for any signs that his enemy would attack. Each step was precise, their movements patient and practiced. Tobias had only recently started training with a sword and he was finding it a bit harder than the hand-to-hand techniques that he'd already mastered.

"The dance of the sword is the most deadly dance there is. In the old eras, the warrior had to master this dance or it would be his last. Since man first made blades we have been living and dying by them. Those with honor have raised them to defend their homes and the weak, but still those without honor have hands." Tobias listened intently to his Sensei's words but didn't dare look at him. "Neither of you are ready yet for steel, but wood will do for now."

The man across from Tobias moved forward. He swung from the shoulder with as much force as he could. Tobias deflected it, but the force caused his sword to be knocked aside. Luckily his opponent had to recover from the strike as well, which gave Tobias enough time to get his guard back up.

"This is a dance, Marcus, a graceful ballet, not a heavy-metal thrash party," their Sensei scolded. "Swift and graceful strikes like the tiger, not lumbering hits like an ox."

Marcus tried striking again, but his attacks were still forceful and a bit clumsy. Tobias blocked the first two but sidestepped the last. He jabbed forward with his wooden blade, but Marcus managed to just barely get out of the way. Tobias smiled, thrilled at his small personal victory. Marcus scowled at him. "What are you smiling about?"

"Just excited that I got so close," Tobias answered truthfully. "I must have gotten lucky, 'cause I haven't been at this for that long. I have to say it felt good though."

"There is no luck," their Sensei corrected. "There is only skill in a fight. You learn the steps of the dance and it becomes a part of you. As your partner dances, the correct steps will come to you without thought." Tobias looked toward his teacher as the man spoke and Marcus took his chance. Tobias didn't notice soon enough and the wooden blade smacked his arm. "Enough." Tobias took a step back, his hand gripping his shoulder. Marcus lowered his weapon and relaxed. "Marcus, there is no honor in taking cheap shots during a duel. Tobias, always keep your guard up when in a fight."

"Yes, Sensei," they said at once.

"That will be all. Tomorrow we will work on being graceful." Their Sensei moved away, leaving the two men alone to clean up the gym.

Tobias moved over to the rack and put his sword away with the others. He was suddenly pushed forward and against the rack. Tobias' head slammed into the wood and he stumbled. He spun around and found Marcus swinging his wood sword with all of his might.

Tobias rolled to the side, dodging the hit, and springing to his feet. He instinctively took a defensive stance. "What's your problem?"

"What's my problem? You're my problem. Sensei has been teaching me the sword for a month, and you've only been at it for a week. How is it fair that you're better than me?" Marcus scowled at him and raised the wood sword again.

Tobias found the strike easy to dodge, as it was slow and his training had taught him to move quickly to avoid being hurt. "Sensei says I'm just a fast learner." His Sensei had told him many times that fighting seemed to be his destiny, what he was born to do. Tobias kept on the defensive, not wanting to get in a fight with Marcus. He took a few steps back, trying to put some distance between him and his enemy.

"That's a load of crap and you know it. There is no such thing as destiny, everything is decided by us, not some predetermined path ahead of us. No one has something they are meant to do, only what they choose to do," Marcus argued.

"That doesn't mean that a person can't have talent. Some people find music easier, or science. For me it's martial arts, and I'm not good with a sword. Your swings are just too slow. You fight like you can't imagine your sword has an edge. You act like it's a bat, a stick you're waving around, not an extension of your body like Sensei says." Tobias moved to the side, avoiding another strike.

"No horsing around," their Sensei chastised as they realized he had re-entered the room. Tobias realized that the old man was looking directly at him. "Finish and clean this mess up." And with that, he once more moved out of the room and left them alone.

The two men stayed still for a moment, looking at each other. Marcus suddenly moved forward and Tobias made his choice. He'd finish this fight. When Marcus swung Tobias ducked under the wood sword and moved to attack. He grabbed Marcus' wrist and twisted it back. The other man cried out in pain and dropped the sword. Tobias slammed his fist

into Marcus' side, aiming for his kidney. Marcus doubled over and Tobias made one last strike. His leg swept Marcus off his feet and the other man fell to the ground.

Marcus lay on the ground and when Tobias was sure he wasn't going to get back up he picked up the wooden sword. Tobias moved over to the rack and put it away before moving to clean up the gym.

44. 044 Burn

****044 Burn****

****Characters:Edward/Emily****

Emily gently touched her shoulder, wincing as pain spread forth from the recent burn. She was sitting on a bench in the locker room, trying to figure out how she was going to remove her shirt. It hurt to lift her shoulder too high, but she didn't know how she was going to get her shirt off without doing just that. She turned around as she heard footsteps behind her.

Edward moved into the locker room, wearing only a gray undershirt and a pair of black pants. He moved over to his locker and stripped off his clothing. Emily sulked for a second, annoyed that he was flaunting his ability to get undressed. She jumped slightly as her shirt was suddenly pulled up. She looked back to see Edward behind her. She frowned at him and Edward sat down on the bench. He lifted up her shirt again and pulled it over her head while Emily kept her arms down. Edward then did the same with her bra, slipping it off for her.

She finally stopped him when his hands moved down to her belt. "I'm not crippled," she snapped. She stood up and removed her pants, tossing them into her locker. Emily looked back, realizing that Edward hadn't moved. "What?"

Edward stood and moved away, toward the showers. Emily just rolled her eyes and removed her underwear, grabbing up her other clothing and tossed them all in her locker. She moved into the showers and to one of the spaces across from Edward. She stared to wash up, being careful to avoid the patches of burned skin, almost wishing that the fuel rod had hit her directly rather than hitting the ground and splashing fire all over her. She'd rather have one patch to avoid than all the smaller ones.

Emily moved to wash her good arm, but flinched as her shoulder protested. A hand settled on her shoulder and she didn't have to look back to know it was Edward. He washed her shoulder, hand gently moving over her skin. Emily shifted, a bit uncomfortable. Although she and Edward had been in what they were calling a relationship for some time, they hadn't done anything intimate other than kiss. Yet here they were in the shower, Edward carefully washing the spots on her shoulder that were too painful to wash herself.

When he finished his hand moved away just as smoothly as it had arrived. The water washed her clean of the soap. When she turned off the water and moved out to the lockers again, Edward was sitting with a towel around his waist. He held out a fresh towel for her and she took it, sitting down on the bench. She dried herself off, having to

dab at the burned areas. She wasn't surprised when, after having finished her burned side Edward pulled the towel from her hand and dried off her good side. Emily sulked but let him finish the task. When the towel finally moved away Emily spoke. "I'm not helpless."

"No you're not," Edward agreed. He wrapped the towel around her body and Emily allowed it. "You are hurt," he added as he tucked the corner of the towel into place. "You didn't need me to do that."

"No, I didn't," Emily admitted. She paused for a moment before looking back at her teammate. "Why are you doing it?" Edward just stared, silent. "Are you doing it because you're my partner, or because you feel like you owe me?" He answered by softly pressing his lips to hers for a moment. Emily furrowed her brow and frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means I didn't do it for either of those reasons," Edward answered. Emily just continued to stare, not understanding. He kissed her again but she was still confused. "Is that not clear enough?"

Emily considered the action, trying to find meaning in it. She finally came to a conclusion that seemed to fit, but Edward could be hard to interpret. Luckily Edward was honest, so clarity was only a question away. "Are you saying you did it because you like me?"

"'Like' seems like a bit small of a word," Edward stated. He started to get dressed, glancing over toward Emily. "Do you need assistance getting dressed?" He glanced over toward the locker and then back to Emily, tilting his head to the side a bit, questioning why she hadn't gotten clothing out.

Emily eyes him, narrowing her gaze. "Are you saying that you love me? And that's why you're helping me?"

"Is it not the same as why you're allowing me to help you?" It was no secret that Emily was prideful, but she hadn't stopped him once. "Are you going to get dressed or do you plan on giving the others a show?" There was something disapproving to Edward's words but his voice held no emotion otherwise.

Emily turned toward her locker and opened it up. "Would you like it if I walked around naked?" Emily pulled out clothing from her locker and put it on the bench.

"You're questioning my sexual orientation and how physically attracted I am to you," Edward stated. He moved around the bench as he slipped on his shirt, moving to stand beside Emily. "Did I do something to cause you to bring those things into question?"

Emily grabbed her underwear and sat down on the bench. She slipped them on a bit stiffly. "Well you did just help me undress, shower, and dry off and you didn't seem to enjoy any of that." Emily stood as she finished sliding on her underwear.

"You're hurt. It seems inappropriate to make any sort of physical move when you're in such a condition." Edward grabbed her bra and

Emily held her hands out. He slid it up her arms and over her head. He pulled the cloth down, the back of his hands running over her chest as he settled the cloth in place. "Why would I want to risk causing you more pain?"

Emily grabbed her pants and sat down again to slip them on. "But we've been together for months, and you've never touched me like you're physically interested." Emily pulled the pants up and stood, tugging them up the rest of the way. "I was just wondering if you were even interested in that sort of thing."

Edward picked up her shirt and she stuck her arms out. "I assure you I am. But the moment hasn't arrived." Emily frowned at him as he slipped the shirt up her arms. "We're happy as we are, and when the time comes we will take our relationship to the next level."

"I'm not asking for sex," Emily clarified before he slipped the shirt over her head. "I'm just talking about even putting a hand on my waist when we kiss. Putting an arm around my shoulder. You know, just normal physical contact."

Edward finished pulling her shirt down. "I didn't know that was appropriate," Edward admitted. "Noted. Is it appropriate when around the rest of the team?" Emily considered the question and nodded. Edward straightened her shirt, his hands resting on her waist as he leaned forward and kissed her. "As you wish," he said before removing his hands. He turned and moved out of the locker room, Emily trailing behind him.

45. 045 Steady

****045 Steady****

****Character: Shadow Blade****

Enre jolted awake as the door to the room opened. He was sitting at the window, having drifted off while waiting for his wife's return. She'd only gone out to get them a bite to eat, and it had taken her longer to return than he had expected. He grumbled, annoyed at how much time had been wasted. He froze when he saw her, and realized she was shaking and that there was blood splattered over her. Enre moved across the room and put a hand on her shoulder, trying to steady her.

He led her into the room, locking their door before he set to work. Enre stripped her clothing and moved into the bathroom. He filled a tub and put the clothing inside to soak them. He then grabbed a rag and a small bowl, filling it with water. With rag and bowl in hand, he moved back out to the main room. He set the bowl down on a table beside their bed. Enre moved over, taking his wife's hand and leading her over to sit down beside the table. He carefully dipped the rag in the water and started to dab away the blood on her face.

Enre had expected one day that his wife would be faced with violence, with death; but he hadn't expected her to react this way. "What happened?"

"I killed Vart," Ahwu answered. Enre stared up at her for a moment, looking her over. Ahwu was skilled with a blade, but he'd never

expected her to be shaken by killing someone. Ahwu stared down at him, reaching out to grip his empty chair. "Enre, what will they do when they find out?"

His mandibles went a bit slack in his surprise; he should have known better. Enre chuckled lightly as he relaxed. "And here I thought you were upset about having killed someone."

Ahwu growled at him. "Of course I'm not upset about that. He attacked me, I had every right to kill him. He wouldn't be dead if he'd kept a better grip on his sword." The female Sangheili snapped her mandibles. "What will the Kaidon do if he finds out?"

Enre huffed at the question. "Vart was a Field Master. The Kaidon will never expect a female to have managed it. If he suspects me, than I shall make up some questioning of my honor that will be accepted."

Ahwu seemed to still be a bit uneasy. "But what will happen if he finds out?" She persisted. Enre could see a sort of fear in her eyes. She feared for their children, for him, and for their dreams. Yet there was no regret for her actions, or fear of what might become of her if their leaders found out.

Enre knelt down on the floor before her. "He will not find out. He is blind to your skill, and too stuck in the old ways to even consider the truth. Now, tell me what happened. You said Vart had a sword?"

Ahwu hesitated for a moment before she started to explain. "I went to get us some food, but when I got to the kitchens the Unggoy had let the fires get low and the food was all cold. I woke them up, scolded them, and decided to head back here as cold food seemed only a mood killer. On my way back, Vart confronted me. He said he knew I'd been practicing with a sword, and threatened to inform the Kaidon in order to get me exiled, and take away my mating rights." Ahwu clenched her hands. "I told him he had no proof, and that he was just boasting. I told him I couldn't be pushed around like he does with his wife, and that he was just jealous of how skilled our children are compared to his. That was when he attacked me." Ahwu clicked her mandibles in annoyance. "He has been out of the field too long. His swings were slow and his form worse than a child. I disarmed him and swung the sword, trying to get him to step back. He stepped forward instead. Just like that he was dead." Ahwu looked down to the ground. "I did not realize how easily he would die. In a fraction of a second and he was dead, lying in a pool of blood."

"We are strong of will and skill, but our bodies are only soft flesh." Blade's finger poked her side, making her jump a bit as he illustrated how soft her flesh was. "Our will and skill are what keep us alive, he let both soften, leaving him with no true armor." Enre leaned toward her. "You have made your first kill, Love. It was a good kill of a high ranked soldier." Enre rumbled deeply. "Am I the only one who is in the mood for some mating?" His hand moved up to her neck, gently touching her skin. "Come, Wife, the Keep is in need of more strong and intelligent offspring."

Ahwu leaned forward, resting her forehead against his. "I think that that is a wonderful idea."

46. 046 Monster

****Prompt 046: Monster****

****Character: David****

David sat at the kitchen table, watching the news anchor on the television talk about some recent story. He was too young to really care about that stuff. He was more focused on his cereal and trying to eat it before it got too soggy. His father, though, was fully focused on the screen. David didn't understand how the news could keep a person's attention. It was always boring, the people on the screen never did anything fun, and the stories were depressing.

David's father huffed, disgusted. "Hard to believe someone could do that to another human being. It's just horrible." The man scowled and bit off a part of his bacon.

"Maybe we shouldn't talk about it in front of David," his mother spoke up. "He's too young to be able to understand." David's mother looked toward him, concerned.

"Nonsense," his father countered. "A man needs to know what the world is like, and David is a man." His father leaned over toward him. "It's about time you learned about how people are. It's not always like it is in books. Tell me, son, what does a bad person look like?"

"He wears black," David began. "He usually has black or blond hair and its slicked back. Oh, and their laugh is evil."

"That's how it is in books and vids, but not in the real world," his father informed him. "In the real world the bad guys look just like you and me. They blend in; and you can't tell who they are just by appearance, only by action. The man they're talking about on the newsâ€¦" his father motioned toward the screen. David nodded his head, indicating he understood what his father was referencing. "He's a bad man, but doesn't look like one. We know he's a bad man because he hurts others, but he's more than that. That man is a monster."

"What's the difference?" David asked.

"Bad guys just hurt people, monsters kill them," his father answered. "The only people you can be sure are good are the police. Their duty is to protect the people. If ever you're in danger, you know to find a police officer." David nodded his head vigorously. His parents had always taught him that if he was threatened or lost that he should look for a police officer. "So if you see someone doing something bad?"

"I'll find a cop and tell them about the bad man," David answered. "So, do they not have evil laughs?" He found it hard to believe they didn't. After all even the bad guys dressed like good guys on the vids had evil laughs.

"No, no evil laugh," his father stated. "You can't judge a man on his laugh. Only on his words and actions."

"All right," David agreed, a bit disappointed. He'd been hoping for something other than actions to tell if someone was bad. He hated that he'd have to wait for someone to be hurt before he could know for sure.

47. 047 Voodoo

****Prompt 047: Voodoo****

****Character: Max****

Max sat beside the bed, content in the silence as he read his book. It was calm in the hospital room, or maybe he'd just grown so used to the beeping of machines and the hum of monitors that he could have been sitting in the quiet of his home and would have felt the same. His gaze drifted from the text to the sleeping face of the woman on the bed. She looked so peaceful, but he knew the reality was far from that. He had more than enough experience with the sick and the dying to know that such a peaceful appearance was just an illusion.

The door to the room opened and Max turned to see his mother walking in. "Hey, Honey." She moved over and placed a kiss on Max's temple. "Any change?" She moved to the chair beside Max and sat down.

"Doctors didn't say anything new. They're still testing her reaction to the medication." Max had heard all the familiar words from the doctors, and he knew it wasn't good. No change meant no improvement, and there had been no change for days. It didn't mean the fight was over, but it had been long enough it did mean things weren't getting better.

Max felt his mother's hand grip his and squeeze lightly. "Well I'm sure that we just have to be patient. If this treatment doesn't work, I have faith that the doctors will come up with one that will." She glanced toward his tablet. "What are you reading?"

"I've been reading up on different religious practices. Maybe there's something that I could do to increase her chances of beating this." His gaze went to the sleeping face of his mother. "I'm reading about voodoo right now, but I don't think that there's any of that I can do."

Max's mother sighed and shook her head. "Max, you know that wouldn't work. Neither you or Linda ever believed in such things, and practices like that have no strength if there is no faith." Laura studied her son for a moment. "What happened to the medical papers you were reading?"

"I got tired of reading all the complications and case studies." Max hadn't been able to handle the fear or thoughts that came with reading up on his diseases and what could go wrong. "I just don't get it, mom." Max set the tablet to the side and looked to his mother on the bed. "I've known so many who were in a position like this and I've always been strong for them. But right now I feel so weak. I'm so afraid and it hurts so much to see her like this. I just don't understand why it hurts so much."

"Sweetie, it's okay for you to be afraid and for it to hurt. She's your mother, not just a friend. She changed your diapers, picked you up when you fell down, and has loved you all your life. She's a special person in your life so it's natural. This isn't the same as facing the illness of a friend, because the bond runs deeper and longer." Laura looked to her wife. "It always hurts more when it's someone we love."

"I know." Max felt frustrated with how badly he was handling the situation. "I guess I just expected I'd be more prepared for something like this." Max closed his eyes and let out a long shaky breath. "I just don't know what to do. She doesn't seem to be getting any better and it's been weeks." Max could feel the dams that had been holding back his emotions for the past few weeks starting to break.

"Oh, Honey." Max's mother's arms wrapped around him and Max leaned into her comfort. He cried against his mother's shoulder, just letting the emotions run their course. He didn't even notice when the doctor entered the room. If he had, he would have been embarrassed as most of the doctors knew him as a cheerful ball of hope, not a crying teenager.

When Max calmed down he finally noticed the presence in the room. "I hate to interrupt," the doctor said politely. Max knew this particular doctor was new to this hospital, but he'd served for a few decades at another medical center before this assignment so he was experienced. He'd only moved because in his older age, and the warm climate here was better for his joints. "The blood tests came back, though I apologize for the wait." Max braced himself for bad news. "We don't want to be too quick to assume anything, but it seems that the medication might be working. We're seeing increase in white blood cells and it appears that the fever might break soon." Max let out a breath of relief. It was the best news they'd gotten since his mother had collapsed in their home weeks ago, and it was more than he had hoped for. "We'll keep an eye on her progress, but this is very promising."

"Thank you so much," Laura said, a wide smile forming on her face. Max couldn't help but smile as well.

48. 048 Shine

****Prompt 048: Shine****

****Character: Edward****

Edward sat on the park bench, watching the people as they walked about. Edward wasn't a big fan of the sunshine, but the festivities didn't continue into the night so he'd just have to deal with it. The entire festival was filled with chatter, laughter, and the sound of game booths. The paths of the park were packed with people and it generated even more heat in the already hot day. Edward didn't understand the attraction of events like this, they were so crowded and there were so many strangers around. It made Edward feel on-guard; there were just too many people around to effectively protect yourself from attacks. He supposed most of the festival goers probably never thought about that, but Edward knew the truth. Danger was always around you.

Security was surprisingly low, though maybe that was because of all the military families around. Some may see that as being protected, but Edward saw it as being vulnerable. At home was when soldiers were most likely to drop their guard, particularly on Reach - making events like this a rebel's dream. A quick look around at the crowd showed that none of them were armed, a tactical mistake. He supposed, though, that it was their own fault if something happened and none of them were ready. It might have been a sign of a bigger issue with the continued fighting. People just weren't aware of what was going on further out in the colonies; though logic would indicate that at least some of these people would know what was really happening. Then again, maybe they were allowing themselves to live in ignorant bliss before having to return to harsh reality.

Still, that sort of attitude invited mistakes and tragedy. He had been researching into the rebellions in the outer colonies since talking to the ODS. If you really wanted to find it the information wasn't that hard to get. They didn't talk about it much on the news, but there were still reports about the number of troops being moved to outer colonies, the militia programs trying to ease the strain on the UNSC, and the continuing attacks that seemed to be impossible to predict. Edward was sure the soldiers in the crowd knew, but the civilians might have just ignored it, not wanting (or able) to face the truth.

Edward's attention was drawn to a young girl as she ran past him, giggling happily as her mother chased after her. The young child stayed out of reach of her follower, enjoying her imposed game. Her mother looked haggard and nearly fed up with her daughter's actions; Edward could see the bags under her eyes, and noticed that her movements were sluggish. A man chuckled as he passed Edward, moving at a more leisurely pace, watching the mother and daughter.

The man pulled something out of his pocket, something black, and Edward tensed for a moment. "Ash!" The man called to the little girl, holding up a small, stuffed black dragon. The little girl wheeled around and looked to the man, eyes wide as she spotted the toy. She ran past her mother and to the man, reaching for the stuffed animal. She took it and the man scooped her up into his arms. "That's my girl."

The woman moved over to join them, a relieved smile on her face. "I don't know how you do that." The man put his arm around her waist and started to move toward the festival.

"Bribery - it always works," the man joked as he led his family away. Edward watched them, annoyed by the unidentifiable emotion he was experiencing at that moment. Did he feel sorry for the family, knowing how much danger they were in? Did he hate them because they were so happy? Or did he envy their bonds, the sort of bonds he'd always avoided? The fact that he didn't know what he was feeling aggravated Edward, and it wasn't new. He'd felt like this before, but he still didn't know what it was or what would make it go away.

Edward's gaze went back to the crowd and he scolded himself for losing focus. He scanned the crowd, making sure to look at every face. He couldn't believe he'd been distracted like that, only giving him more reason to want to be rid of it. His eyes fell on a man and

he recognized him from the pictures he'd been given. The man looked around, shifted the backpack on his shoulder, and walked down the line of people. Edward calmly stood from the bench and casually made his way into the crowd, trailing the man.

49. 049 Intents

****Prompt 049: Intents****

****Character: Shadow Blade****

Enre looked over the area, searching for any sign of someone that might see them. The coast seemed clear, so he motioned to his cohorts and they crossed the open field. Enre had seen the structure from a distance for years, and up close it looked completely different. From a distance you couldn't see the symbols carved into the metal, or that the walls had no clear markings of how the parts of the structure had been connected. He stared at the unusual metal, wondering how they'd manipulated it in such a way. He was pulled out of those thoughts as Ahwu touched his arm. She motioned toward the entrance of the building and Enre simply nodded, moving toward the opening.

To Enre's surprise and relief there was no one inside; leaving them free and clear. "This is the dumbest thing you have ever talked me into," Roth complained as he followed Enre in. "The both of you are insane." He looked to Ahwu and then back to Enre. "If anyone sees us, we'll be killed."

"We'll just say that the Gods spoke to us and we were feeling particularly devout," Enre answered, starting to explore. "Shouldn't there be a Bishop?" He asked as he moved to a wall, looking at the symbols and lines."

"I would think so, but maybe the Bishop is away for some other service of his post." Ahwu moved to the wall beside Enre, reaching out and gently touching the metal. "I don't see what's so special about this place. Why do we see these as holy?"

"Because they are temples of the Forerunners," Roth answered, looking around nervously. "We looked inside, now can we go?"

"Come on, aren't you a little interested in his place? Look around you; does this look like a temple? It doesn't look like one to me. I wonder what the original intent for this structure was..."

"It's a temple, meant for worship," Roth asserted again. "That's what we were told by the Prophets and they have never lied to us."

"Have they? We do not explore or study these structures ourselves," Ahwu said, still staring at the wall. "We follow the words of the Prophets like blind sheep." The female Sangheili moved down the wall. "What if these structures are meant to lift Sangheili kind to a new age of power and growth, but the Prophets are holding us back?"

"What are you saying? They'll kill you for saying things like that," Roth warned, looking around to be sure no one had heard. "The Prophets can read and understand these structures better than

us."

"Exactly, and they make no effort to teach us. What better way to keep us under their control than to feed us lies we wish to hear, and have us worship empty structures?" Enre felt uncomfortable at Ahwu's words. While he didn't exactly believe in the Forerunners being Gods, he'd been taught all his life that they were partners with the Prophets. Though the Prophets did sit as religious leaders, which annoyed him, he hadn't really questioned them. "You agree, don't you Enre?"

Enre mulled over the possibility, finding it hard to come up with any defensive evidence that the Prophets weren't lying. "The basis of our Covenant and their power is built on the false religion of the Forerunners, on lies. And when your leadership is all built on a lie, how can you not tell more lies?" Roth shifted uncomfortably, always feeling uneasy when they talked openly of their disbelief in the Forerunners. Enre ignored him and continued. "And what faith can we have in leaders that take orders from leaders powered by lies?"

"None," Ahwu answered as she moved across the room. "That is why you will make such a good Kaidon." She turned and smiled at him and Enre couldn't help but return it.

"I think we've been here long enough," Roth spoke up. "The longer we stay the more likely it is that we'll be caught."

Enre sighed, but had to admit that his friend was right. "We have already seen that this building is empty. There is no other reason for it to exist other than as a shelter." He turned to the exit and checked that the coast was still clear.

"It figures that the building would be as empty as the religion built around it," Ahwu grumbled as she moved toward the exit, leading the way back toward the Keep.

50. 050 Camping

****Prompt 050: Camping****

****Character: David****

David stared up at the stars above, trying to pick out different constellations. He didn't really know many of them so he was struggling to figure out which was which. That wasn't really why he was staring at the stars anyway, it was just something you couldn't see in the city. The stars were just one of the reasons that David loved camping, but that was a long list. It was right up there under the quiet of the forest and being able to see so many animals.

If he stayed up late enough he'd get to see some of the nocturnal creatures that didn't come into the city. There were rodents that could blend in perfectly with the trees due to the moss that grew on its body and a lizard that could imitate the calls of several bugs to lure in small birds to eat. It was all a part of nature that had been pushed away by streets and buildings and could only be found out in the woods. Maybe if he got really lucky one of the small wild felines would pass through the area and they'd get a glimpse.

"The sleeping bags are set up," Terry announced, moving out of their tent. "I think we chose a good spot, just high enough so that if it rains we won't be flooded but if we go on a hike tomorrow it won't be a hard walk back up to camp." Terry lay down beside David in the grass and stretched out. "I haven't been camping in so long."

"I took Dana out here a few months ago, but she hated it," David said, rolling onto his side to look at his partner while they talked.

"No wonder you two didn't work out. This is something you love, so she should at least be able to tolerate it." Terry rolled onto his side as well so they were face-to-face. "How'd she handle it?"

"Not well," David answered with a slight laugh. "Complained the whole time, particularly about the lack of bathrooms." David smiled at the other man. "Nothing like you."

"Well I used to go camping every year on my birthday, so I love it. I haven't been in years though so you might have to help me relearn a few things." Terry grinned and scooted a bit closer. "Hopefully you're a good teacher."

"I know a thing or two," David replied, moving close enough to set his forehead against his companion's. "Tomorrow we'll go for a nice hike, there's a place nearby we can have a picnic, and there's a glen my dad and I used to go where this time of year we'd find Blood Finch nests."

Terry's eyes opened a little wider. "You know where to find Blood Finch? I love those," he said as he grinned. "One nested in my backyard when I was a kid and I watched it raise a family. I love the way their black feathers look perfect against the dark red, and their call is so cool."

"Well I know of a place where they always nest, at least twenty every year, sometimes more. I would suggest having the picnic there, but we don't want them trying to steal our food so we can leave that as the climax of our day." David was excited to see Terry's enthusiasm; it promised that weekend to be a good time, not one filled with complaining and groaning.

"I'm glad that we came out here," Terry said. "We really needed some time away from the city, and it's so quiet and private out here." He paused for a moment before he suddenly sat up. "What do you say to making some s'mores?"

David set two fingers against his neck and smiled. "Well I've got a pulse, so hell yeah," David answered as he sat up. "I'll get the supplies, do you know where the roasting sticks are?"

"Yeah, I packed them away," Terry answered as he moved over to their supplies and started to dig around. "I remember that we'd only bring one bag of marshmallows when we went camping because we didn't have the money for a big bag. I usually only got one or two s'mores at the most."

"Well I got a big bag, so you can stuff yourself silly," David assured his partner as he pulled out a large bag of the fluffy white

treats. "I got enough that we could make some every night, or put ourselves in a diabetic coma."

Terry looked at the large bag David had set out and watched as he pulled out a large box of gram crackers and six chocolate bars. "You really did make sure we were stocked," he said, surprised. "Maybe my sister is right. You're a keeper."

David smiled and chuckled, leaning over and kissed Terry's cheek. "Well I certainly think I am. I haven't kicked myself out of the house yet." Terry laughed and pulled out their roasting sticks before helping to gather the supplies and they moved over toward the small fire they'd built.

51. 051 Grave

****Prompt 051 Grave****

****Character: Patrick****

Patrick stood in silence and tugged his jacket tighter around himself to keep in his body heat as the wind rushed over the land. He didn't visit this place as often as he should have, but with his transport heading off planet soon, this was likely his last chance. It was possible that he would be able to make a trip back home eventually; but there was also the chance that he'd never come back to this planet ever again. That hadn't been something that he'd considered when he'd signed up, but it was a reality he'd come to accept. And having accepted that possibility he also knew he'd regret not having visited one last time.

He'd only been to visit the grave a couple times since it had been erected and he'd always felt bad about that. There was something about it though that just made him uncomfortable, so he avoided it. His parents had never pushed him to visit either so he'd had nothing to force him into facing his unease. There was just something about the tombstone that made Patrick want to turn around and walk away. It was stupid really, as it was only a stone, but there was so much emotion attached to such an ancillary object. The few times he had come before he basically just stood there and said nothing, not really understanding what he was supposed to do. It was odd that he found the concept of talking to the gravestone as though it were a person stupid, when he would often talk in a similar fashion to the tech he worked on.

He wasn't even sure how he should begin, or if it would simply be pointless to try. He used to start their conversations with 'hey dweeb', but that seemed disrespectful to say to someone that was dead. Maybe he'd just skip on the whole talking thing, as she didn't really believe in spirits or that Ben would somehow hear him. He just stood in the empty cemetery going over what memories he still had of Ben. That was the real purpose of a grave really; it was a monument to remind you, to keep the memories of the dead alive. Though slowly, over time, those old memories would be replaced by ones of staring at a stone in a sort of sad irony. It was probably a good thing then that Patrick hadn't come by too many times, as he didn't have enough memories of Ben when he was alive to risk them being outweighed by memories of his grave.

Patrick pulled out his phone and glanced down at the clock, frowning at the time. He needed to head home and pack up his things before he had to head out. He wouldn't be able to take much with him so it wouldn't take him long, but he'd wasted enough time as it was. He slipped his phone back into his pocket and let out a long breath. "Well, see you later little bro." He nodded to the grave, feeling foolish the whole time, before he turned around and walked toward his home. It was better not to be late for his ride to boot if he wanted to make a good first impression.

End
file.